

How to be Brave

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Summary: Hiccup and Astrid are now the parents of seventeen-year-old Hope and twelve-year-old Magnus. When an old enemy of Hiccup's returns, it's up to his daughter to do what's right. Hope must learn where the line has to be drawn, no matter what the consequences. AstridxHiccup, OCxOC. Rated T for blood and mild torture scenes. I update when the last chapter gets a review, R&R please!

## 1. An Unusual Proposal

From the back of a dragon, everything seems small. For some, it was easy to forget what was important. When you can fly great distances in a matter of minutes, why would you ever think of going home? When you could demolish a tree in seconds, it was easy to get carried away and level the entire forest. When you had the might of a dragon in your control, it wasn't a stretch to want to use it to control everything. But throughout everything, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock (the third, for those of you who are recording this for the history books) stayed true to himself. Throughout his early years of social awkwardness and peer pressure to be something he wasn't, he rose victorious above those who had put him down for so long. Throughout every disappointed conversation with his father, (Stoick the Vast, for the historians once more) he never lost hope that he would someday make him proud. Throughout the uneasy transition from no authority to being chief of the Hairy Hooligan tribe, Hiccup remained adorkable, inventive, and unsure.

The particular morning that we are beginning the history record on, July 8th, was round about when spring finally rolled into Berk. The sun was shining as brightly and as warmly as it could, and the sky was free of hail. Hiccup didn't expect that to last long though, he didn't have high hopes for the weather. He had woken up at precisely eight-oh-five that morning. He would have stayed in longer due to the holiday (it was Thor's Day Thursday, nobody had to work on that day), but he had invited Astrid out for nine a.m on the dot. After stumbling out of bed, nearly ending up face first on the floor due to

tripping on the blanket, Hiccup crossed the room to his clothing chest. He grabbed a fresh green tunic from the top of the stack and pulled off his old one, the one he'd worn to bed the previous night. After pulling on the tunic, he fumbled around under the bed and triumphantly pulled out his sock and boot (it is to be noted that this particular Hiccup Horrendous Haddock only had a single foot, after losing his left one at age fifteen). After putting both of those on his single foot, he headed down the stairs to his kitchen.

Hiccup tended to have things in just the right place simply because he knew he was going to need it to be there eventually. The same was no different with his foodstuffs. There was a small loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese in a pouch sitting on the tabletop right next to a butter knife, just waiting for Hiccup to head out and need to bring breakfast on the go. He picked up both the leather pouch and the roughly formed iron knife and went out the front door. A fresh and pleasantly cool breeze caressed him seconds later. Immediately to the right of the house was a barn. This barn was where Toothless was housed. There were no gates on either the front or back of this barn, Toothless sometimes liked to wander the surrounding woods, or go to the pond to catch himself a midnight snack. Hiccup smirked at the sight of the huge black creature curled up like a cat on his bed of hay. As deadly as Toothless could be, he was far too lazy to do much damage. At least, lately he was. True, he sprung up at the chance to go out for a flight and his battlefield reactions were as sharp as ever, but in between he mostly slept or lounged around. Hiccup made a mental note to take Toothless out more often, and then prodded Toothless' tail.

"C'mon, Bud," said Hiccup as soon as Toothless' green eyes opened. He reached into the dented trough of dead fish and tossed one to Toothless. It didn't get the chance to hit the ground, disappearing down his enormous maw in the blink of an eye. The morsel seemed to wake him up. Hiccup opened the lid of one of the smaller portable baskets and placed the pouch and knife inside, along with three extra fish. He reached down into his trouser pocket and pulled out something else, something small that he had spent weeks in his workshop crafting. He put this in one of the extra pouches and dropped it inside of the basket as well. He used the leather strap attached to the basket to sling it over his shoulder. "Today is a very big day. I've gotta be down at the new house by nine or Astrid is gonna kill me. Then who would take care of you?"

Toothless grumbled out something that was probably dragon for, "Don't be so dramatic." (Please note that dragons cannot speak any dialect save calls specific to the species, contrary to what some legends would have you think) Hiccup scoffed and saddled Toothless. After climbing up onto his back and hooking himself onto the saddle, Hiccup urged Toothless up into the clouds. The weather was only more pleasant the farther up they went. The breeze blew at just the right strength, speed, and temperature. It ruffled his brown hair and brought a smile to his face, thinking about how wonderful the day was turning out to be. Hiccup passed by the coast of the island. He spotted his mother and Cloudjumper down at the port, likely settling a trading dispute between two hard-headed villagers. Her gaze flickered briefly to the sky, but returned there upon seeing her boy in the clouds. She gave a big wave, so that she would be sure to be seen. Hiccup's smile widened and he returned the wave, glad to have seen his mother. It was only Hiccup and Valka who knew what made

today so special. Hiccup could scarcely believe that only a few years back, she had been living in a cave with hundreds of rescued dragons, and he hadn't the faintest idea if she was alive or dead.

Without any further delays, Hiccup proceeded to the new house that had been built for himself and his future wife to share. It had been finished just shy of a month ago. He had yet to see the inside. He wasn't supposed to open the door until the eve of his wedding, when he was actually going to need it. It was placed at the edge of the small valley beyond one of the main hills of the island. Beyond the valley was a thin stretch of forest, surrounding it in every direction. The leaves of the trees were just beginning to grow back after the harsh winter. Through the woods was nothing but a sheer cliff with a straight plummet into the churning ocean below. The house stood at the base of the hill, leaving nothing but grass in the other three directions. Having a yard that wide was beneficial when the country's main animal was the dragon. The nearest houses rested on the top of the hill, a five minute uphill trek away, should they need anything. The village was just beyond the hill. Hiccup prayed to Odin that Astrid and Stormfly wouldn't be sitting out in the vast yard, waiting for his arrival. His prayers were answered, but not entirely. Stormfly and Astrid were approaching the house at the exact same instant. They waved to each other and landed down in the freshly trimmed green grass.

"Good morning, Milady," said Hiccup, hoisting himself off of the saddle. Astrid did the same and the dragons flopped down, taking a deserved rest after the flight. "How are you this fine morning?"

"I'm fine, Hiccup," said Astrid, taking notice of the basket slung over his shoulder. "What'cha got there, huh?"

"Just breakfast," said Hiccup, lowering himself down on the grass and removing the basket from his shoulder. Astrid plunked down across from him. Hiccup lifted the lid of the basket and removed the leather pouch with the bread and cheese, along with the knife. He removed the other pouch discreetly, so as not to pique Astrid's interest, and then tossed the basket over to the dragons. The fish tumbled out and the two made quick work of the food. Hiccup pulled out the bread and cheese. He sliced a bit off of each and handed them to Astrid. "I'm glad I picked this spot. It's the perfect place to settle down. I just hope they got the interior of the house right. You think I should have been more specific?"

"Hiccup, I'm sure it's fine," said Astrid, taking a bite of the cheese in her hand. "After all, you were pretty specific in your decorating instructions. You said, 'Think cherry tree', how much could someone mess that up?"

"Um, a lot?" said Hiccup jokingly, taking a bit from his bread. The rustling of the branches was fairly relaxing, it helped take some of the edge off of what he was about to do. "Astrid, if I did something crazy, would you still love me?"

"Hiccup, I love you because you do crazy things," said Astrid with a laugh. Hiccup smiled lovingly at her while her gaze was up at the clouds. He felt so lucky that she loved him. After all, he was nothing impressive, hardly the stuff of legend. The smile fell and his eyes flickered to the grass beneath them when her eyes met his.

"So, what's that crazy thing you were going to do? Not gonna go off on another cartography mission, are you?"

"No, no, not a cartography mission. Something much closer to home. Something much harder," said Hiccup. He looked up at her teasing grin and rolled his eyes. "You are not making this any easier, you know."

"Fishbone, I am never going to make things easy for you. This is me you're talking to," said Astrid, taking his right hand in hers and meeting his green eyes with her blue ones. He hadn't been getting enough sleep; she could see it in the dark circles around his eyes. She was about to nag him for it, but then she remembered that it was partly her fault. "After all, I'm the only girl on Berk who wakes her boyfriend up by falling on him repeatedly."

"Ugh, don't remind me," groaned Hiccup, remembering how he'd woken up on many occasions to the air rushing out of his lungs and three-quarters of her weight crushing down his breastbone. He sighed and smiled at her, knowing he wouldn't want it any other way. "No, Iâ€¦ I need toâ€¦ Ask you something, Astrid."

"Oh. Okay then?" said Astrid, wondering what he meant. He rose to his feet (or foot, whichever), bring her up with him. She noticed the smaller pouch clutched in his hand. She wondered if maybe he was thinking about leaving the island for a while. She was worried for maybe a few seconds before she realized the look on his face was not his 'Good-bye' face. "Hiccup, what is it?"

"Astrid, how old were we?" asked Hiccup, placing his hands on her shoulders, or rather, her shoulder's armour. Astrid's eyebrows knit together. She hadn't the faintest idea where this was going. "How old were we when the dragons became part of life on Berk?"

"We were fifteen," said Astrid, still fairly confused. "Hiccup, what does this have to do with what you have to ask me?"

"Because every day since we were fifteen, I've woken up knowing that either you were outside the door to my room, my house, or the DragonAcademy. You were never very far," said Hiccup, the loving smile creeping onto his face involuntarily. Astrid's face responded and returned the smile seconds later. "And no matter how many times you punched me, slapped me, set my clothing on fire, insulted me, or pushed me, I always knew that that was you're extremely odd way of showing you cared. And I know I've never said this before, and I don't know how you're going to feel about this, butâ€¦ Astrid, I love you."

A shocked look came to Astrid's face. Her shock only continued when Hiccup pulled a metallic object that glinted in the sun from the small pouch, cast aside the pouch, and fell to one knee. Astrid knew right then exactly what he'd brought her here to do. Her gaze flickered very briefly to the house a few dozen feet away. He intended to share that house with her.

"Astrid, I know I'm not much," said Hiccup, holding up a bronze ring with a white stone in the center. Astrid knew better than to stoop to get a closer look at it. "But I'll love you like I'm made of much greater stuff, I promise. Will you marry me?"

Astrid said nothing, a million thoughts racing through her head at once. Her heart raced, her breathing became shallow, her throat tightened, and her eyes brimmed with tears. She couldn't focus on anything, not a sound, not a sight, not a thought. She stayed silent for a few seconds until her mind formed a thought she could cling to. It made her breathing go back to normal, her throat loosen, and her fists clench at her sides. It was only three words, three little words that she completely and entirely related to. How dare he? It repeated over and over in her head, getting louder and louder by the second. How dare he? How dare he?! \_How dare he?! HOW DARE HE?!\_ By this time, Hiccup was wondering why she hadn't said anything.

Astrid wasn't in the present moment, however. She was six years old again, hearing her father's thunderous yelling, watching as he tossed her protesting mother aside like a rag doll and left, and slamming the door behind him so hard that one of the hinges snapped. She saw in her mind's eye her mother crumple to the ground, heard her broken sobs. That same anger she'd felt then boiled up. She wasn't going to fall for it; she'd never have her heart torn out like that.

"Um, Astrid? There are really only two answers to this question, so could you pick one so I can-?" He would've finished the question, but Astrid effectively cut him off with a hard punch to the jaw. Hiccup fell back, landing on his elbows with his legs splayed out. His right hand flew to the beginnings of a bruise on his chin while his left snatched the ring before it could roll away. He looked up and a fearful look came to his face when Astrid fell to her knees and grabbed his tunic in her fist, the other arm drawn back to land another punch. His arms flew up to defend his face. Stormfly and Toothless didn't even bat an eye. If it had been a different person in that situation in place of Astrid or Hiccup, they'd rush to aid them, but they were used to Astrid beating up on Hiccup. "Astrid, what theâ€¦?"

"How dare you?!" asked Astrid, giving voice to the bitter thoughts and memories racing a million miles an hour. "After everything you've put me through? Just disappearing for days on end, with no apology when you get back? Throwing yourself into fights you can't possibly win? Never once asking me if I was sick of all of the stupid expectations put on me?! After so arrogantly thinking you're the only one who has it rough, you have the gall to ask if I would want to spend my life with you?! Huh?!"

"Those are all very excellent questions," said Hiccup, arms lowering just enough so that he could meet her eyes. "What do I say to you to make you not punch me like I very much feel you will?"

"You promise," growled Astrid, arm pulled back farther than before. Hiccup flinched and moved his arms back up. "You promise me that you will never ever â€¦!"

Astrid took a few deep breaths, and lowered her fist slowly. Her chest and throat tightened again and the tears that had never left her eyes brimmed over, spilling down her round cheeks. She shifted out of her attacking position and onto her knees. Hiccup brought his arms down to his sides, looking at her sceptically. When he saw her tears, his eyes took on a sympathetic light. He placed a tentative hand on her shoulder and she all but fell into his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. Hiccup sat up straighter and held her tight, knowing that she had some sort of reason for her quick change of

mood. She always did. Astrid took a shaky breath between streams of tears and finished her sentence.

"You promise me that you will never ever leave me the way Dad left Mom," said Astrid, her face pressed against his shoulder. Hiccup exhaled sharply, like he'd been punched in the gut, upon realizing that she thought he'd do something so low. Astrid took another breath and sat back, hands on his shoulders. "I saw what that did to Mom. She was devastated for years. She still isn't the same. So please, don't leave me."

"Oh, Astrid," said Hiccup softly, folding her into his arms again. "I promise. I swear on all the gods and everyone I've ever loved that I will never \_ever \_leave you alone like that."

"Okay," said Astrid, knowing that the tone of her voice showed her reassurance better than she could represent in words. She pulled back again and smiled through her tears, wiping them off of her cheeks. "Then I'd be absolutely thrilled to marry you, Hiccup."

Hiccup couldn't help smiling as he lifted the ring to her outstretched and waiting left hand. He slipped the ring onto her left ring finger and looked up to see her expression. She bit her lip in excitement at took a close look at the ring. It wasn't a normal ring, with a stone set on a band; Hiccup was far too into showing off his blacksmith skills to do something so plain. Instead, it was made of what looked to be miniscule twigs, with diamonds on every leaf. At the very center was an opal, pure white and yet a hundred different colors at once. Astrid looked up from the ring and at Hiccup, her smile only growing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and planted her lips on his, hundreds of hopeful thoughts of the future replacing her bitter thoughts of the past.

## 2. Crybabies

The next few months were a whirlwind of planning, gathering, making, baking, and keeping Hiccup away from the wedding planning as much as possible. Astrid knew if he got his hands on it for even a second it would become this vastly complicated, dragon-laced extravaganza. Astrid had to pry him away from the plans with a stick just to make sure he didn't get too crazy. He got to pick the cake flavour. That was basically all he was allowed to 'help' with. He complained, but Astrid ignored him when he got pouty.

After what seemed like ages, the morning of the wedding finally arrived. Hiccup was still fast asleep when Astrid came to get him, still in her nightclothes with her hair in the style her pillow chose for her. She had no idea how he could sleep so soundly at a time like this. She walked to his bedside, held her arms out at her sides, and was about to flop down onto his stomach when she realized that was probably not the best thing to do, considering the circumstances. She lowered herself slowly and noiselessly onto her knees. She didn't try to wake him up. Instead, she watched him, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing. He looked so much less worried when he was asleep. She hadn't really taken time to notice it before. She softly brushed a lock of his hair from his forehead and smiled lovingly. He was a truly beautiful person, both inside and out, and she counted herself lucky for the ring on her finger. She rested her hand on his cheek. He was going to be hers. By that time the next day, he'd be

hers and no one else's. She gave a quiet, breathy laugh and relished in that thought for a few more minutes. Hers. Hers. All hers. Not anyone else's, hers. No more uncertainty about each other's feelings, no more questionable looks from their friends. Just them. Together, happy, the way it should be. She shook her head at how sappy she sounded and placed a soft, lingering kiss on his forehead. Someone else could wake him up, she had unwanted primping to get to before her mother, Valka, and Ruffnut came looking for her. Once he heard the door creak shut, Hiccup slowly opened one eye, just to see if she really was gone. He'd woken up when the door had creaked open, but he'd stayed quiet, so he could stop her should she attempt to fall on him to wake him up. His fingertips brushed his forehead and he broke into a grin. He threw off his blanket and dashed to his desk, where the wedding bands were. He had forged them himself, just like a special wedding gift she'd receive later.

Astrid was on her way to the village's equivalent of a salon when she saw her mother, Valka and Ruffnut on their way to her house. She sighed and ran over to them. These three were pretty much the only girls in her life, save Stormfly and Heather (she and Heather had kept in touch since rescuing her from Alvin and the Outcasts), she was grateful to have them by her side today. She had only been nervous a few times before in her life, but this day was too nerve-wracking to not bring butterflies to her stomach, despite her usually fearless attitude towards everything.

"There she is!" exclaimed Ruffnut, her usual tone of annoyance present in her words. Astrid watched as the three women redirected their route in her direction. Her gaze flickered between their eyes; her mother's wet grey eyes, Valka's beaming green ones, and Ruffnut's unamused blue ones. "You realize you have a wedding today, right?"

"No, Ruff, I completely forgot all about my own wedding," said Astrid, her voice dripping with sarcasm but her expression friendly. "Thank you ever so much for reminding me. Where would I be without you?"

"Um, dead in a ditch?" said Ruffnut, crossing her arms and her voice taking on a matter-of-fact tone. "Remember, I saved your life that one time."

"Oh yes, that one time," said Astrid, pretending to know what Ruffnut was talking about. Valka suppressed a laugh and Astrid's mother cleared her throat. When she had Astrid's attention, she held up the sack with Astrid's wedding clothes and accessories inside. "Right, right. We all have a wedding to get ready for. No time for childish arguments."

"But childish arguments are my favourite part of being friends with you," grumbled Ruffnut, the group continuing on to the salon. "It's the only reason I spend time with you."

"It warms the cockles of my heart to hear that, Ruff," said Astrid, wrapping one arm around Ruffnut's shoulder and the other around Valka's. "It's always good to know why others like you, right Val?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Valka with her slightly Scottish-sounding lilt, wrapping one of her arms around Astrid's shoulder and reeling

Ingrid, Astrid's mother, in with the other, her double braids swinging in time with her step. She smiled down at Astrid's gratified expression. "It's been ages since I've prepared for a wedding with the bride. Last time, let's see, who's wedding was it? Oh yes! Siri's wedding. That'd be your mum, Ruffnut."

"Uh, duh! I know my own mother's name," said Ruffnut. Despite how annoyed she sounded, she begrudgingly threw her arm over Astrid's shoulder, the barest hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Contrary to how she acted, she loved being with other girls in place of her brother. "Please tell me I don't have to wear make-up."

"Sadly, we all do," said Ingrid, finally joining in the conversation. She tried to keep the tears out of her voice, but she failed. She laughed it off. "Besides, it's only for an hour or so. You can scrub it off after the ceremony's done."

"Mrs. Hofferson, I know that this is somehow touching for you three, but could you not cry?" asked Ruffnut, not giving a single damn. The truth was, if anyone cried, she'd burst into tears herself, and her tough girl rep would be down the drain. "Seriously, I'll barf."

"Oh, come on now, Ruffnut," said Valka, leaning forward to look past Astrid at Ruffnut. "Where's your sense of romance?"

"It died when Fishlegs started hitting on me," said Ruffnut, a sour look coming to her face at the memory. He had followed her around for weeks, showering her with compliments and gifts. The only affections he got in return were the tender caresses of her fist in his gut. "I'm done with romance for a long time now."

"What about," said Astrid, raising her eyebrows suggestively, "Eret?"

"Shut up, Astrid, you know it's not like that," said Ruffnut. The blush that came to her face betrayed her in the end, and the other three laughed heartily as though it was the funniest thing in the world. "Oh, come on! You've all got someone, you wouldn't like me teasing you about it, would you?"

"Correction," said Ingrid. "I used to have someone."

"Still," said Ruffnut, her gaze falling to the ground beneath her feet. "It isn't funny."

The laughter continued, no matter how much Ruffnut complained. This was only to be expected. Arms around each other's shoulders still, they continued on to the salon. They were there in five minutes. Inside, the 'Beauty Bunch' as they were known throughout the village, set to work on all four women. Braids were unbraided, hair was combed, lashes were defined, complexions made even, and lips made fuller. The five teenage girls, the ones who made up the Beauty Bunch, were thoroughly upset by Ruffnut's hair. No matter how much they combed it, it wouldn't flatten down. The youngest parted it and shook her head in dissatisfaction. Valka, Astrid's and Ingrid's hair was obedient to their teasing and fussing, on the other hand. They pulled back Ingrid's greying blonde hair behind her ears and braided the strands together behind her head. The bottom part of her hair just puffed in a pretty way, so they left that be. Valka's hair



curled a little at the bottom in a way the Beauty Bunch didn't want to ruin. They let two clumps of hair dangle on either side of her face, framing it beautifully. Astrid's hair was swept back, yanked to the right, and braided with a lilac ribbon lacing its way through. The general color scheme for the wedding was purple, all shades of it, with browns and off-whites of leather and fur mixed in. The clothing of those assembled would be no different.

Ruffnut's dress was compromised of two layers, a short-sleeved, deep lilac slip, and a long-sleeved plum colored cotton overcoat stitched with embroidered flowers. A thick leather belt was wrapped around the part of her torso just above her hipbones, and tied in the back. She flat out refused to wear jewellery or feminize herself further, wearing her muddy boots underneath the dress just to be difficult. Valka wore an eggplant purple dress with a sweeping hem. The sleeves only went to her elbows. It was made of a discoloured fabric, making it seem lighter in some places and darker in others. Ingrid had chosen a dark fuchsia dress with trailing sleeves and a lighter fuchsia bodice. It was embroidered with fleur-de-lis patterns. Astrid actually had no idea what her wedding dress was going to look like. The mother's had twisted her arm until she agreed to let them pick the design.

The oldest in the Beauty Bunch took Astrid aside while the others were fussing over the other women. She insisted that Astrid keep her eyes closed until the dress was on, and Astrid begrudgingly complied. Her dress was compromised of two layers like Ruffnut's, the first layer free of complicated stitching and made of cotton (she could feel this, she didn't peek), and the second layer made most likely of lace. She heard the metallic clinking of small metal object and felt tightness at her hips. The sudden cold of metal was felt. It was obvious to her that she now had a belt of some sort. She heard Valka, Ingrid, and Ruffnut come into the room and there were a few audible gasps. Astrid wanted to see so very desperately what she was wearing. When the Beauty Bunch told her to open her eyes, her lids flew open and her gaze fell on an unexpected sight in the mirror. It was plain, so very plain, but Astrid loved its simplicity. The bottom layer was a light eggplant purple with long sleeves and a high collar, while the top layer was lilac lace with a part in the middle, revealing the layer underneath. The lace layer had sleeves on the shoulders, but not beyond that, and revealed the collar of the eggplant layer. Around her waist was a gold belt, so intricately crafted that it appeared to have been woven. It was panelled, so that it folded comfortably around her waist. Her fingers grazed the belt, knowing that it could only have been Hiccup who'd made it for her.

"That's Hiccup's wedding present for you, but you probably guessed that by now," said Ingrid, her voice choked with sobs she was fighting to control. Astrid smiled wide, reaching for her mother's hands. "He isn't the only one who has a gift for you today. We all do."

From a pocket Astrid hadn't realized Ingrid had she pulled a glinting gold necklace. Astrid let go of her hands and Ingrid went behind her, locking the necklace into place. Astrid reached up for the pendant and slowly began to recognize it. In runes on the front was her family name, engraved by hand. She knew that this particular necklace had been one her mother had worn often until her father left. It had belonged to her paternal grandmother and great-grandmother and great-great grandmother. Astrid couldn't count how many generations

of Hofferson women had worn it.

"I know this is a bad time to give this to you, seeing as how you'll only be a Hofferson legally for a few more hours," said Ingrid, turning her daughter to face her. The tears Ingrid had struggled with since that morning came pouring down her cheeks upon seeing exactly how much her little baby had grown up and she jerked her daughter into her arms for a hug. Astrid held back her tears, because she knew she couldn't show up at the ceremony with red eyes and a blotchy face. She hugged her mother back firmly. "But I needed you to know that even though you're going to grow old a Haddock, I never want you to forget your old Mum. I never want you to forget where you came from, or what your beginnings were. You're a Hofferson, through and through. Never ever forget that."

"No, I won't," said Astrid, letting go of her mother and dabbing her eyes furiously. "I promise."

"Here, justâ€¦ Just take them," said Ruffnut, cursing herself for letting her voice crack. She held out her favourite pair of gold earrings, the hoop ones that weren't too big or too small, but rather the perfect size. "I stole them right out of a pirate's ears, so justâ€¦ don't lose them or break them or whatever you silly simpering cry-babies do with jewellery."

"Ruffnut, are you sure?" asked Astrid, gently picking up the hoops from her hand. "These are your favourite."

"That's why I want you to have them, you idiot," said Ruffnut, punching Astrid's shoulder. "You're my best friend, it's your wedding day, so just take the earrings and don't cry again."

"Thanks, Ruff," said Astrid, putting in the earrings with hardly a wince. She looked at her reflection again. She looked more sophisticated with the added jewellery. She felt older, too. She turned to Valka, unable to identify exactly what emotion was painted on her face. Sadness? Happiness? Nostalgia? Hope? "I suppose you probably have a bracelet or ring or something like that for me, don't you?"

"Oh no, nothing quite like that," said Valka with a laugh. From behind her back she produced a small purple rose with a short, de-thorned stem. Valka slipped it into Astrid's hair just above her right ear. Her hands placed themselves on Astrid's shoulders before sliding down her arms and taking Astrid's own. "What I wanted to give you was reassurance. Hiccup has told me how much you worried about all the expectations placed on you upon getting married. I just wanted to tell you that you don't have to worry about them at all. You don't need to be quiet and stay inside and never speak your mind. You don't need to worry about having sons and keeping the lineage going. The only thing you have to do is be you. Be the amazing wonderful Astrid Hofferson that my son fell in love with, and everything else will work itself out. Trust me. I married Stoick the Vast and I can make him regret marrying me with a single look. I know what I'm talking about."

Astrid smiled in relief and gave Valka a quick hug. She was glad to have a woman like Valka as a mother-in-law, even though she brought up her producing heirs worry in front of Ruffnut and the Beauty Bunch. She had the sort of fire in her that Astrid admired more than

anything. She could understand where Hiccup got his sarcasm and fascination of dragons and intuitiveness so much clearer now that Valka was back in the village. After the Beauty Bunch cleaned up Ingrid's make-up, the four women proceeded to the town hall, where Hiccup was waiting anxiously with the other guests.

### 3. The Chief's Wedding

Hiccup felt kind of ridiculous in the long fur cloak that Stoick had forced him to wear, but besides that, he was confident in his attempt at wardrobe choice. He had replaced his usual leather boot with a fur one, to match the stupid robe. Under the robe, he wore a coat of a deep indigo, with a medallion of the crest of Berk just above the breast pocket. His pants were pretty much the same; the men didn't have to go that far. He was already beginning to question his decision to make Fishlegs his best man. He'd successfully talked Hiccup's ear off and it had only been maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. Hiccup sat on a stool and huffed out another sigh, looking around at the assembled group of people. His father stood just behind him, watching the open doorway. Hiccup turned half-way around and looked up past his father's greying beard and sighed. "

So, since it appears we have time," said Hiccup, rubbing his hands up and down his legs absently, "Do you have any last-minute advice?"

"Always do as she says," said Stoick, wishing his father had told him that before his marriage to Valka. "Trust me; it'll save a lot of arguments."

"Well, I already do that, so I'll just," said Hiccup, ruffling his hair. "I'll just keep doing that."

Stoick was about to tell him that that was the smartest move he could hope to make in a marriage, but Gobber rushed into the hall. He had been posted outside to watch for the women. It had been about two hours since everyone had assembled. He nodded to Stoick, and Stoick took his place behind the wedding arch. The nod meant the bridal party was mere minutes away. The assembly perked up, sitting up straight and taking on more dignified postures. Fishlegs miraculously stopped talking. Hiccup rose quickly to his feet and pushed the stool out of sight. He handed the wedding bands to his father and turned to face the aisle. He faked a confident smile and screamed internally while fighting the urge to vomit. The band provided a wedding march as a soundtrack to his anxiety. The first one into the hall was Ruffnut, and she looked both emotional and annoyed at the same time, arms folded across her chest and her pace far quicker than normal. She took her place on the right side of the arch just as Ingrid came into the room. Valka was immediately after her. Hiccup snuck a quick peek at his father and saw that he was beaming at Valka. She blushed slightly and looked down at her feet for a few seconds before taking her place behind Ingrid. Hiccup's internal screaming grew louder and more desperate, knowing that the next person who was coming through that door was Astrid. He wanted to look away, to give himself a moment to compose himself, but he stayed firmly in the same position, the confident grin plastered on his face. And there she was, looking stunning in her wedding clothes. Hiccup met her eyes and she grinned excitedly at him for a second before returning her face to normal. She held nothing in her hands, where most brides held a bouquet of

flowers. She did, however, have a rose in her hair. When she took her place next to him, the assembly sat and the wedding march stopped. Stoick took a breath and Hiccup's internal screaming became strangled sobbing, because he was absolutely certain he was going to mess up at some point.

"It is with the utmost pride that I stand here this morning. Of all the wedding ceremonies I have been forced to preside over, this is the only one I ever really wanted to perform. It was not too long ago that I myself stood in my son's spot, with that beautiful creature about to become my wife," said Stoick in his fatherly yet commanding tone. His eyes flickered to Valka for a moment before she rolled her eyes and gestured for him to get back to the ceremony. Stoick complied. "No doubt Hiccup is just as nervous as I was. He is doing a better job at hiding it than I did, to say the least. It is one of life's richest surprises when the accidental meeting of two life paths lead them to proceed together along the common path as husband and wife. It is one of life's finest experiences when a casual relationship grows into a permanent bond of love. This meeting and this growth bring us together today. Astrid and Hiccup, will you take vows here before all of us which symbolize the manifested vows you have already made and will continue to make to each other throughout your lives?"

Astrid and Hiccup both replied with, 'We will'. It was customary for the male to go first in the ceremony, so Hiccup suppressed his internal sobbing and racked his brain for the words he had wrestled with for months. Fortunately, he found them.

"Astrid Hofferson, I acknowledge my love for you and invite you to share my life as I hope to share yours. I promise to walk by your side, to love, help, and encourage you," said Hiccup, impressing himself with how eloquently his words came. "I vow to take time to share with you, to listen, and to care. I will share your laughter and your tears as your partner, lover, and friend. I promise to always respect you and honor you as an individual and to be conscious of your needs. I will seek through kindness and compassion to achieve with you the life we have planned together. I promise to never leave your side, through thick or thin. That is my promise to you."

"What have I to give you, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third?" asked Astrid, her tone lending some comic relief to the situation. Words weren't exactly her forte, so she knew she had to use her presentation of the words to show how sincere she was. "I have the promise to take you as my only love from this day forward. I have the promise to stand by your side, to attempt to listen to you, but ignore you when you say something stupid. I have the promise to comfort you when you cry, and to join your laughter with my own, especially if you slip and fall in a mud puddle. That is what I have to give to you. I hope it's enough."

"The circle is the symbol of the sun, earth, and universe. It is the symbol of peace," said Stoick, placing Astrid's wedding band in Hiccup's hand and Hiccup's in Astrid's. "Let this ring be the symbol of unity and peace in which your two lives are joined in one unbroken circle. Wherever you go, return unto one another and to your togetherness."

"I give you this ring, wear it with love and joy," said Hiccup, sliding the thin gold band etched with a vine just above her

engagement ring. Astrid smiled reassuringly, giving Hiccup the courage to go on. "I choose you to be my partner, to have and to hold from this day forward for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish as long as we both shall live."

"Love has given us wings, and our journey begins today," said Astrid, giving a quick glance to the doorway, where the dragons were assembled. She gave them a little wave and turned back to Hiccup, not caring that his hands were a little sweaty. She understood why. She slid Hiccup's wider etched gold ring onto his left ring finger, her eyes not leaving his. "Hiccup, wherever those wings may carry me, I will stay by your side as your wife. Take this ring as a sign of my love."

"You are mature people who have established individual patterns of living. Yet you have found not only a need for companionship, but the satisfaction of that need in each other's company. It is this love, based upon a responsible understanding, that will aid you in creating out of your two lives a marriage and a happiness you will share together," said Stoick, giving the two a proud smile. Valka and Ingrid wiped their eyes and Ruffnut made a gagging sound. Stoick gave her a stern look before returning to the matter at hand. "Stand fast in hope and confidence, believing in yourself and believing in each other. Now that you two have come before your friends and family and have declared your love and devotion to each other, I greet you with them as husband and wife. Go on then, lad. Kiss the woman."

Hiccup sighed and gave his father an unamused look. He looked back down at Astrid and she smiled, her top teeth biting down softly on her bottom lip. He grasped her hands firmly in his and her teeth released her lip as he leaned in towards her. When their lips met, the assembled crowd rose to their feet, cheering, stomping, and clapping. Astrid and Hiccup paid them no mind. They kissed each other softly at first, seeking and giving comfort and reassurance, but it soon grew deeper and more passionate. His hands released hers and moved to her hips. Her arms wrapped themselves around his neck, pulling him closer to her. He nearly stumbled because of his prosthetic, but he managed to keep his footing long enough to not make a fool of himself. The crowd cheered on long after their lips broke apart and the newlyweds turned to wave to their friends and family. They smiled at each other as though they were the only two in the room as they walked back down the aisle and to the dragons. Toothless lowed happily and Astrid hugged his neck. Hiccup stroked Stormfly's nose before Astrid yanked him away to the west wing of the town hall, where the wedding feast would be taking place. Once inside, Hiccup peeled off the ugly cloak and dropped it like a dead animal.

Upon seating themselves at the main table, the attendants presented the meals to all of the guests. It was bulky, hearty, Viking food, served with mead, ale, and wine. The crowd was far from quiet. If anyone wanted to speak with the newlyweds, they had only to waltz up to the main table and yell loud enough to be heard over the crowd. Valka and Ingrid both attempted to make touching speeches to their children, but the noise was far too much for them to be heard. They merely shook their heads and said something about telling them the next day. Neither Astrid nor Hiccup could make out exactly what they were saying. When three hours had passed, the food had been consumed and the drinking had long since begun. The people had remained

entertained by singing drinking songs, drinking toasts to the newlyweds, downing drinks in one go, and basically just drinking a lot of alcohol. When he felt enough time had passed, ordered quiet. The crowd hushed almost instantly.

"I know that this marriage is a cause for celebration, and I know very well that we tend to getâ€|carried away with our celebrating," said Stoick, remembering how hectic and noisy his own wedding feast had been. "But now is the time for the first dance, the final wedding rite of passage."

"Now?" said Hiccup, mentally hyperventilating because he forgot to practice. He hadn't danced since long before he lost his foot, and he'd been none to graceful back then. He expected he was even less so now. "But, Dad, Astrid hasn't even finished eating yet."

"That's okay, Hiccup," said Astrid, realizing based on his tone that he was likely going to embarrass himself dancing. She put aside her fork and knife and rose out of her chair. "That was my third helping. I'm full anyways. C'mon Hiccup. Let's dance."

Hiccup gulped as he realized he wasn't going to be able to get out of this. Astrid smirked evilly as he took her hand, seeing the look of fear and defeat in his eyes. She led him to the section of the town hall that wasn't occupied by tables and chairs, the one under the circle of strung up lanterns. Hiccup took several deep breaths, but they did nothing to slow his racing heartbeat. Astrid knew how to dance, she just didn't like to. This one time, she'd pretend she did just to make him seem more awkward. When they positioned themselves as closely to the center of the section as they could, most of the people rose from their seats and crowded around to watch. Some stayed seated, continuing on drinking and eating. Valka, Stoick, and Ingrid were at the front of the crowd, watching with encouraging smiles.

Astrid began mentally playing out the scene; he would start out by holding her the wrong way, ease into doing the wrong steps, and end with a graceful trip and faceplant combo. Astrid smiled inwardly at how funny it would be. She imagined the laughter of the guests and the embarrassment on his face as he struggled to rise to his feet. She laughed almost inaudibly and reached up to brush a wisp of hair from her eyes. The glint of her rings caught her eye. She pulled back her hand and looked at them for a moment. She imagined the embarrassment on his face again and found that she no longer relished in it. In her fantasy, she told the others to leave him alone, helped him to his feet, taught him the steps, and was altogether supportive. Like a friend was supposed to be. Like a wife was supposed to be. Once the crowd settled, she took his right hand and placed it on her left hip, clasping his left off to the side with her right. She placed her left hand on his right shoulder just as the music began.

"It's your left, your right, your forward, and your backwards. One step only. Slowly," she whispered into his ear. When she pulled back she smiled. He gave her a look of confusion and she let out a little sigh. She pulled him along with her as she took one small, slow step to the right, to the left, backwards, and forwards. "Like that, until the song is over."

Hiccup was too stunned that Astrid was actually helping him for a

change that he didn't do anything but silently follow her directions. After a minute or so, he began to follow the pattern more comfortably. He pulled Astrid in closer, moving his right hand to the small of her back. She smiled up demurely at him and he returned it with a loving smile of his own. He leaned down and kissed her lightly, earning a few hoots and catcalls from the spectators. Astrid gave Hiccup a 'Boys will be boys' look and he twirled her, growing more and more confident in his dancing by the second. When the song ended, Hiccup stepped back and bowed. Astrid laughed and curtsied as though the two had planned this all along. The crowd cheered and surged into the dance space as the next song began. The couple had to rush out of the area to avoid being squished between the bodies of the party-goers. That was fine by Hiccup; he had much quieter plans for the evening. It was only maybe three in the afternoon, but the sun was already beginning to set. Winter was close; soon they'd be spending six hours a day in total darkness. Hiccup led Astrid outside of the town hall, where they could finally talk without having to yell.

"Gods, Astrid," said Hiccup, leaning back against the side of the building. "I thought you were going to let me make a fool out of myself back there."

"Oh, I would've," said Astrid. She held up her left hand. "The only issue is this wedding ring. Cursed thing makes me loving, supportive and understanding. I don't know how much longer I can stand this."

"Whoa, calm down," said Hiccup, placing his hands on her shoulders and then pulling her in for a hug. "You're going to have to put up with occasionally being loving supportive and understanding for the rest of your life. You promised, remember?"

"I can still fall on you to wake you up in the mornings, right?" asked Astrid, her voice slightly muffled by his chest. "That's my favourite thing about mornings."

"Sure Astrid," said Hiccup, stroking her back. "You can still fall on me to wake me up in the mornings."

"Then you and I shouldn't have a problem," said Astrid, pulling back. "So, wanna go see the inside of the house now? You'll finally find out if you were specific enough or not."

"That was the reason I brought you out here," said Hiccup. They linked hands and sauntered off in the direction of the house, enjoying each other's company. "You think they'll miss us?"

"Hiccup, it's our wedding feast," said Astrid, smiling at the setting sun. The brilliant hues of oranges, pinks, and purples took her breath away. "Of course they aren't going to miss us."

Hiccup laughed and the two continued on to their new house. Everything inside their old ones that they'd need had been moved the day before. Everything else was thrown away or made into firewood. A few rooms of the house had already been finished long before, like the kitchen and extra bedrooms. Hiccup and Astrid's things had been placed in the correct rooms among the pre-existing décor. Valka had said there was one room in particular that she wanted them to see, though she never fully explained why. Hiccup began to grow anxious

when they came close to the front door. The cross-hatched walls and thatched roof of the exterior were not new to him, nor were the bricks and stones that made up the short pathway to the front door. Once they were close enough, Hiccup rested his hand on the doorknob and looked at Astrid. She nodded encouragingly. Hiccup took a deep breath and opened the door. It wasn't that he didn't hate the interior, but he had worked himself up to have much higher hopes for it. The walls were painted a deep cherry red. They were decorated with Hiccup's sketches and blueprints; even his old breast hat was hanging on a peg above the hearth. There were two couches and a table, each decorated with little tidbits and trinkets. The main sitting room led off in two directions, towards the stairs and through another doorway. Hiccup poked his head in the other room. It was the kitchen, with a fire oven, counters, rows of pots and pans mounted on the ceiling, and a few knives lining the walls. Nothing too interesting was to be seen in there. Hiccup left Astrid to examine the trinkets on the small tables and went up the stairs. There were four rooms on that level. One of them was an empty room with the same paint as the sitting room on the walls. He smiled, knowing that Stoick had decided to let Hiccup choose how to use the room. Another of the rooms was a guest room, with a barrel to place possessions in, a clothing chest, a desk, a lantern, and a bed with a lumpy tan pillow and a wool blanket. The next of the rooms was clearly his and Astrid's because the bed was cut to accommodate two people instead of one. There were more blueprints, sketches and maps along the walls. The baseboard went up to about waist level, cut from shining cherry wood. There were two clothing chests, a vanity, and a fireplace. The bed was flanked on either side with an end table, a lantern set on each, just waiting to be lit.

It was the fourth and final room that got to Hiccup, because he knew that this was the one Valka had been talking about. Hiccup stepped inside, leaving the door ajar behind him. It wasn't the largest room in the house by any means, but it was the one that spoke the most volumes to him. Immediately to his right was the outside wall of the closet. To his left was the opposite wall, painted in a sunset shade of red and ivy vines painted on as decoration. In front of him, slightly to the right was a rocking chair with a velvet embroidered pillow resting on it. Slightly behind that was a clothing chest. Immediately in front of Hiccup, placed just underneath the window, was a cradle, carved from pine wood with red blankets. Hanging from the ceiling above that was a mobile, with carvings of different kinds of dragons as the decoration. A smile came to Hiccup's face as he saw what was nestled in the corner of the cradle. He reached down and scooped it up in his hands. He knew that Valka herself had put the small stuffed dragon in the cradle. It had been his least favorite possession as a child, but it had easily become his most treasured. He was happy that his mother had thought to place it in his future child's nursery. At that thought, he felt arms wrap around his waist and a chin resting on his shoulder.

"I see Valka got a little carried away with her decorating," said Astrid softly, hugging him from behind. He put the dragon back in the cradle and turned to face her. "After all, we aren't going to need a nursery for a while."

"I like it," said Hiccup, smiling as his eyes swept the room. "It's going to be great."

"This whole marriage thing seems a lot more complicated when you see



the bigger picture," said Astrid, switching from having her arms around his waist to wrapping them around his neck. "In the long run, it's so much more than just being happy together."

"Oh, it certainly helps if you marry someone who makes you happy," said Hiccup. He leaned down and caught her lips with his. The kiss began soft and sweet, but Astrid pulled him in closer and deepened the kiss. She grabbed a fistful of his hair and clutched it, shifting her lips and pulling herself closer. Hiccup pulled away and transformed their position into a hug instead. "Just because I've never actually told you this before, you make me very happy, Astrid. Even when you punch me and fall on me first thing in the morning. Do you think they'll come looking for us here?"

"Oh, sweet, innocent Hiccup," said Astrid, pulling back just enough to meet his eyes and give him a fake sympathetic look. "Trust me when I say that they have a very good reason not to come anywhere near this house until morning."

Hiccup wasn't quite sure whether to be worried or happy about that statement. He had a feeling Astrid would tell him which one was the proper reaction, but not for a long while.

#### 4. I Can Only Hope

A long while passed before either of them even thought about the need to use the nursery, but it came up again when Astrid announced her pregnancy a year and a half after the wedding. The village saw it as another excuse to drink while Hiccup thought it should be a little more intimately celebrated. He took Astrid to the clearing where he and Toothless had first become friends and set out a picnic. Of course, Astrid had insisted that just the two of them was far too lovey dovey for her tastes. She went behind his back and invited Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, and Snotlout to come along. Hiccup's face when they arrived and saw the old gang waiting was priceless. In the end, he was happy for their presence. Snotlout and Tuffnut kept pestering Hiccup about how he felt about being a dad. Fishlegs made plans with Hiccup for a mechanism that would rock the cradle automatically. Astrid vetoed the idea as fast as it sprang up from their overexcited minds. Ruffnut begrudgingly offered some mothering tips her mother had rammed down her throat as soon as she turned sixteen and every day afterwards. Snotlout boasted that his sons would always be able to outdo Hiccup's at everything they did. Astrid retorted that at least their children would have brains.

The day ended sooner than Astrid had planned, due to the fact that Tuffnut and Snotlout ended up in a fist fight. She had come to expect little else from her friends. Months passed, as months do. Valka and Ingrid came by often to help Astrid and Hiccup around the house. Stoick often came by for dinner, sharing stories of his youth, glorious battles, his proudest achievements, anything he wanted to, really. Valka had taught Astrid how to knit when she was confined to sitting or lying by Gothi. Astrid got so bored that she invented three new knitting patterns and made fifty pairs of socks, all of the pairs different sizes. The measurements ranged from Stoick to newborn and everything in between.

She was knitting a sweater for Ruffnut out of white yarn when her water broke. Fortunately, Valka was in the kitchen at the time, so

when Astrid asked if it was normal for her to wet herself without meaning to, she knew that it was time. Astrid insisted on going to get Hiccup first, since Ingrid had told her having the father's support made it slightly easier to deliver the baby.

It wasn't until the late hours of the night that the first child of the chief came into the world. Alas, this child was not the one they were expecting. One of the many blessings placed upon them was the blessing of many strong sons. This child was not a son. This child wasn't even strong. When the midwife handed Astrid her baby, she asked where the rest of her was. She was by far the frailest, smallest, and lightest child anyone in the room had seen. She had a thin crop of dirty blonde hair and her entire body was dusted lightly with dark brown freckles. Her eyes were blue-grey like Astrid's, but Valka insisted that Hiccup's eyes had been the same color when he was born. Her eyes would likely change color over time. The only thing that really worried Astrid and Hiccup was that she hadn't cried. Not a single whimper or tear. Gothi was called in, to inspect the baby. After an hour of inspection, Gothi asked to speak with Valka. She returned to the room with the baby and a sad look on her face.

"Mum, what is it?" asked Hiccup. Valka handed him the child and he cradled her gently in his arms. "What did Gothi say?"

"Hiccupâ€¦" Valka began. A choked sob forced her to stop and give the couple sympathetic looks. She walked in between the bedside and Hiccup, resting a hand on their shoulders. "Iâ€¦ I am so sorry, you two. This can't be helped. I wish to all the gods that it didn't have to be this way, but there's no changing it."

"Valka," said Astrid with a stern and worried tone. "What's wrong? What did Gothi say?"

"Have you two picked a name for her?" asked Valka. They nodded. They'd decide on Magnus for a boy and Valkyrie for a girl. They would be officially naming her in three days, at her naming ceremony. Valka took a shaky breath and looked between Astrid, Hiccup, and her granddaughter. "Well, even if you hadn't, it wouldn't matter. There will be no naming ceremony. Gothi saidâ€¦ She saidâ€¦ She said that your child is too weak. It will be a miracle if she lives through the night."

"Wh- What?!" exclaimed Hiccup and Astrid in unison. Hiccup clutched his daughter closer and gave his mother a hurt look. "Mom, no. She'sâ€¦ She's a little small, I get that butâ€¦ Dead by morning? No. No, I don't believe that. Sheâ€¦ She's fine."

Astrid and Valka both gave Hiccup apologetic looks and he shook his head furiously.

"No. No. No! No, she's fine. Astrid, Mom, she's fine," said Hiccup, glancing down at his daughter's face. Her eyes were wide open, staring at nothing in particular. Her tongue poked out of her mouth slightly and she stretched her arms out, little hands grasping at the air. He smiled wistfully, tears brimming in his eyes and offered her his index finger. She grabbed onto it immediately, giving it a slight squeeze. In that slight squeeze, he realized he now had something very important to fight for. And this something was never going to be hurt, not as long as he was alive. He was filled with a fire he hadn't felt since he saw Toothless in those chains so long ago.

Hiccup looked back up at the women. "It's not true. She's fine. She'll make it tonight and every night for a very long time and she's going to be absolutely amazing. You can't just write her off because Gothi said something. Gothi doesn't know everything you know. Astrid, you can give up on her if you want, but I won't. Never."

"Hiccup," said Astrid, sitting up and reaching out to him.  
"Please."

"No!" said Hiccup, glancing back down at the child in his arms. He walked to the open door of their bedroom and stood in the doorway for a second. "I'll be in the nursery if either of you feel like making sense."

Hiccup stalked across the hall, ignoring the calls of his wife and mother. He opened the door to the nursery and went in, shutting the door behind him. He plunked down in the rocking chair and waited for either of them to come in and tell him again how the precious thing in his arms was going to be taken from him too soon. He slowly began to rock in the chair, thinking through the possibilities. Forward and his little girl was wrenched away from him by crooked-fingered death, backwards and he was kneeling arms held out and a joyous look on his face as she took her first uncertain wobbly steps to him. He heard Valka leave, and he continued to rock, eyes only for his daughter. So it went, forward bringing on his fears and concerns, backward showing his family, full and happy. He had no idea how long this went on, but after what he was fairly certain was a few hours, she finally began to sort of whimper. Hiccup shifted her in her arms a bit more and gave her a smile.

"Hey," said Hiccup in a friendly tone, kissing her forehead. She quieted and Hiccup smiled wider, brushing a tear away from his cheek. "You have nothing to cry about, sweetheart. Trust me. It's all snoozing and eating for you right now. Your problem's aren't gonna start for a long time. Even when you think its gonna be all happy happy, joy joy, life just sucker punches you in the gut. But they can't have you. Anything but you."

It was in that position that Astrid found him the next morning. She was wrapped in a robe, arms crossed meekly across her chest. She lingered in the doorway, waiting for Hiccup to look up from the bundle in his arms at her. He didn't.

"Are you going to come in?" asked Hiccup after a few minutes, never looking up at her. "You're letting the cold in."

"Did you sleep?" asked Astrid. He shook his head.

"Did you put her down?" He shook his head again.

"Did you eat?" Another shake.

"Are you okay?"

"Astrid, I don't remember how to be okay," said Hiccup, finally meeting her eyes with his bleary ones. His voice was full of pain, so much so that it hurt Astrid. It hurt to know he was likely dying a little and there was nothing she could do. "I have never been more terrified than I am right now in my life. How can I possibly be okay?"

"I'll go make breakfast," said Astrid after a while. She couldn't bring up their daughter again, or she'd hear that broken voice again. "I don't blame you if you don't want any. And, Hiccup? I'm sorry. We can'tâ€¦ We can't keep her forever."

With that, Astrid turned and left, shutting the door behind her. Hiccup sighed and kissed his daughter's forehead again, praying to all of the gods that were listening that Astrid was wrong this time.

## 5. Seventeen Years Later

\_This is Berk. It boasts the most amazing creatures in the world. They used to be the village's problem, but now they're our friends. They're with us in our high points and our low points. They're with us during times of peace, and they stay by our side during times of war. My name is Hope. Great name, I know. I wanted something fiercer. My dad picked it the day I was born. My dad is kind of overprotective, but he's not stifling. Then there's my mother, Astrid, still showboating even though she's not a kid anymore. Over there we have my annoying and cocky little brother, Magnus. He thinks he's the coolest kid on the island even though he's only twelve. The day my problems began appearing was on the final day of dragon training. I was going up against the children of my dad's friends. You'd think that us having known each other since birth would make us go easy on each other, but it's made us more competitive, if anything. With today's dragon races, I knew that I was going to need all the luck the gods saw fit to bestow upon me. Unfortunately, that wasn't very much luck, in the endâ€¦|\_

## 6. Hope's Big Day

If there was ever one thing Hope should have known by the time she'd turned seventeen, it was that Hairy Hooligans never went easy on you, no matter what. Not Derek Venturi, Hope's boyfriend. Not Treetrunks Ingerman, the slip of a thing that she still has a hard time believing is Fishlegs' daughter. Not Snublout Jorgenson, Snotlout's son who really lives up to the family legacy. Not Freya or Darren Thorston, Tuffnut's twins. Especially not her little brother. Ever since he was eight, that little terror had been ravaging the village with his attitude. Hiccup told Hope that sometime he was worse than Snotlout ever was. Hope didn't know whether it was because he was the chief's son or because he was the hard-headed Viking everyone likes for some reason, but he was the reason she liked to spend so much time with her Gran, a.k.a Valka.

Anyways, back to Dragon Training. Hope woke up that morning, the sun was shining, Terrible Terrors were singing on the rooftops, and the day was looking fairly promising. She groggily sat up and rubbed her eyes, looking around the room. She could hear the clatter of her mother and brother downstairs. Mingled in with their voices was one that she had been looking forward to for a few days now. Hiccup was home. She leapt out of bed, dirty blonde hair unkempt, still in my thin nightdress, and all but flew down the stairs. He was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, facing away from her. In one motion, she jumped up and clung to him with her arms and legs, almost dragging him down on top of her.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed with a grunt, bracing himself against the sudden weight. Hope laughed and slid down onto the floor. He turned around and placed a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head. "What am I gonna do with you, clinging to me like a spider monkey just because you're glad I'm home. Speaking of monkeys, guess what you and I are gonna bake for dessert."

"Um, gee let me think," she replied, mocking a pensive pose. She broke character and placed an excited kiss on his cheek. "Banana bread! Honestly, you're the best dad ever!"

"I'm glad you still think that," said Hiccup, smiling in a way that told her that the compliment was not lost on him. "They told me you would think I was the worst from ages twelve to twenty-five. Magnus sure does."

"Huh?" asked Magnus, looking up from sharpening his dagger with a sandstone. His blue-grey eyes indicated that he had no idea what they were talking about. His voice returned to its normal sarcasm as he refocused his attentions on the dagger. "Sure. Whatever you say, Chief."

"See what I mean?" said Hiccup, gesturing at Magnus. Hope laughed and Hiccup pulled a pouch out of his Swiss army knife suit, as everyone but Hiccup liked to call it. He placed it in her hands. "Get dressed, brush your hair, and then bring that to Gran. She wanted me to get that for her."

"Sure thing, Daddy-o," Hope replied. She started for the stairs, and then she turned back to him. "And wish me luck with the dragon training finals today!"

"You know I do," said Hiccup. She was half-way up the stairs when he called after me. "Make sure you remember to re-string your bow before you go!"

Hope called back that she would remember and returned to her bedroom. It was next door to the nursery, where both Magnus and Hope had spent the first three years of their lives, and across the hall from Magnus's. The whole of the house was painted in rich shades of red, green, and brown. Hiccup told Hope it was because he was eating cherries the day they asked him how he wanted the house painted, and he replied with, "Like a cherry tree." Hope personally would've gone with dawn or sunset, because she loved the colors of those times, all orange and pink and purple. But her hand-down favourite color was indigo. She had loved that purplish blue color ever since Hiccup had shown her what it looked like when she was six. It was the color of most of her shirts, thanks to Astrid, who had really taken up a fascination with knitting, sewing, dyeing, and anything related to making clothing. It would be one of the colors of the face-paint she'd sport today, showing that she was in the senior class of the dragon academy. She swapped her nightgown for comfy brown trousers and an indigo tunic with long, tight sleeves. She slipped on her leather cuffs and matching boots, slung her quiver and bow over her shoulder, and rushed down the stairs again.

She said a rushed good-bye to her family, grabbed a banana because she knew they weren't going to last very long, and headed out the door. Hiccup called from the open doorway that they'd be in the

stands at noon. Hope smiled in response and ran to her dragon, Sugar, a light purple colored Deadly Nadder. Sugar perked up upon seeing her rider and squawked a greeting. Hope stroked Sugar's nose and climbed up onto the waiting saddle. After hooking her feet into the stirrups and stuffing the banana into one of the saddle bags, Hope and Sugar took to the skies. Hope supposed the air must have been cold, but she was so used to the morning's chill that it no longer bothered her. From the sky, Hope could see the whole of the island. There was her house, nestled at the very edge of the cliffs. There was the DragonAcademy, the second-largest building on Berk. There was the town hall, where she had been forced to sit through many boring speeches and treaty-signings. She was a bit relieved that it was Magnus that was going to be chief instead of her, but then she shook her head. Why was she glad about that? Magnus would make a horrible chief if he didn't learn the error of his ways, and soon. Her murky green eyes finally found the house she was looking for, the one that housed Hiccup's parents. Well, sometimes it was parents, but more often than not, it was parent. Stoick rarely left the village after Hiccup had been passed the torch of chieftdom. Valka had spent so long being isolated from humans that often times she preferred to be alone with her dragons. She only returned to Berk because of her family. She felt obligated to come back, because she'd missed out on so much of their lives already. It took her a while to come around, but eventually she showed Hope the way she saw things. Hope could understand why she preferred the dragon valley of Itchy Armpit (the unfortunate name Hiccup had chosen to give to the breath-taking, foggy, birch tree covered area where Valka had been hiding out). Sometime Valka liked to visit DragonIsland, too, but that was less often. Hope prayed that Valka was at the house, because if she had to fly all the way to Itchy Armpit to deliver the pouch, she'd be late for the final exams. With just the right amount of luck, Valka was the one that answered the door after Hope had barely knocked.

"I was just about to head back to the valley," said Valka after a grandmotherly hug. "You're lucky you caught me. A few more minutes and you would've been in trouble."

"I know, Gran," replied Hope. Valka smiled and hope handed her the leather pouch. Once Valka opened it, a rich pungent smell wafted out from it. Hope recognized the smell as dried Knot Blossom. It was used for a lot of things, cooking, medicine, perfume, cleaning. Valka sealed the pouch again and hooked it onto her belt. "Are you going to leave right now, Gran? I'd appreciate it if you came to my final exams."

"Gods above, that's today?" asked Valka, a look of genuine surprise coming to her face. "I thought it was next week. Wow, am I getting old. No, Valkyrie, I guess I won't be leaving right now. Come in, I'll braid your hair and we can paint your face up so they know it's you out there."

Hope smiled when Valka called her by her middle name instead of Hope. She liked to be thought of as a fearsome warrior rather than a delicate little baby who needed a name to hold on to this side of the ground. Valka knew that. Hope never complained about it to Hiccup, because Hiccup was still traumatized at the thought of losing his children. He'd been scared beyond belief when Hope was born, and he hadn't been able to get over it for Magnus either. She let him believe that Hope was the perfect name for her.

Once inside, Hope could hear the rumbles of Stoick's snores through the ceiling. Hope pointed up at the ceiling and raised an eyebrow. Valka sighed and shrugged as if to say, "What can you do?" Hope laughed and sat down in one of the wooden chairs. Valka pulled a comb from one of the chests in the living room and set to work on Hope's hair, teasing it this way and that. Hope flinched and winced over and over. When Valka was finished, she handed Hope a hand mirror. Hope smiled when she saw what Valka had done with her hair. Her hair was now braided in two places from the top of her head all the way to the tips of her hair, coming together and forming one thick braid that barely passed Hope's shoulders.

"I love it!" exclaimed Hope, whirling around and hugging Valka again. Valka laughed in an understanding way and patted Hope's back. When Hope let go, she practically dragged Valka out into the living room, pulling the paint pots out from under the sofa. "Now, let's get Sugar and I all painted up for the exams."

"If I know you as well as I ought to, I'd say you want to start with this one," said Valka, holding up the scuffed and dingy clay pot labelled 'Indigo'. Hope smiled and took the paint pot. "Since you have that color, why not stick with different shades of purple. Just make sure you have a bright purple so they know it's you."

Fingers were dipped in and out of paint pots, creating multicoloured purple swirls over Hope's cheeks and forehead. Hope overdid it a little and painted over her upper eyelids, too. Valka insisted that she looked like she had two black eyes. Hope didn't think it was that bad. Getting Sugar painted wasn't as easy, so Valka and Hope agreed on just three stripes, one on her snout and one on each wing. Sugar was fine to be painted that way, which was good for everyone involved. Hope even painted the feathers on her arrows purple, so that everyone would know they were hers. There were only a few people taking the exam that day that were going to be archers, but Hope liked to be dramatic.

After another hug, this time for a good-bye, Hope jumped on the saddle and took to the skies once more. Once in the air, she found that her friends were all heading to AngelPointPark for the 'No hard feelings, but I'm gonna cream you' picnic. It was so that they could maintain their friendship despite how unfair they were going to be to each other later. Treetrunks had a green Gronckle, because that particular dragon type just happened to work well for her family. Snublout was on his blood-orange Monstrous Nightmare. Derek rode a small brown Timber Jack, because he thought it looked cool. Freya and Darren didn't follow in their father and aunt's footsteps; they had their own separate dragons. Freya chose a Scauldron, and Darren a Changewing. No Zippleback for those twins, they liked their freedom too much to be stuck to one another. She caught a glimpse of what she supposed was a wave from Derek and returned it.

AngelPointPark was at the very tip of Berk, about the size of Hope's yard. It was big enough for a few people and a few dragons, but not any more than that or it would begin to feel cramped. Treetrunks had gone ahead and set out the picnic ahead of time, which meant there was likely going to be a lot of food. That little girl could eat, but she stayed the smallest little thing on Berk, somehow. It wasn't an advantage; she was generally cold because of her lack of body fat or muscle. And she was weak as a daisy stem. Luckily, her father had a Gronckle iron sword of her, lighter than the other swords but

stronger than them as well.

When Sugar and the other dragons landed down in the park, the children called out to each other, sliding out of their saddles and plunking down on the blanket set out in the middle of the park. The dragons socialized with one another as well, because dragon friendships are real friendships too.

"Well, Hope," said Freya with her gruff voice, one that sounded almost identical to Ruffnut's. "Nice face paint. I especially like that you didn't put a handprint anywhere on your face. And you didn't use any red."

"Oh, give it up, Freya," said Hope, rolling her eyes. "Not everything has to go back to red."

"Nope," said Derek, going around behind Hope and pulling her into a hug. "You think you can handle the competition out there, Valkyrie?"

"I can handle you, if that's what you mean," said Hope, grabbing onto his scarred forearm. He let go and plunked down next to her, giving her the chance to get lost in his midnight blue eyes. He brushed his auburn hair from his eyes and smiled his crooked smile. "What, I can! I could take on any of you! Let's not forget who my dad is, people."

"Um, let's not forget who my dad is. Honestly, you guys can be so thick," said Snublout. He was the spitting image of his father, the same way that his father was the spitting image of his father, and so on and so forth. "My dad is the greatest warrior in Berk's army."

"Oh, please," said Derek, scoffing. Everyone knew that Snotlout was all pomp and no circumstance. "Your dad can barely hit a target with an axe."

"Well, tough guy," said Snublout, taking a leg of chicken from the basket. "At least my dad is alive."

"For the record, Snublout, my dad is alive. My Mom is dead," said Derek, taking some bread and splitting it in half. He offered a half to Hope and she took it with a grateful smile. "It's just a long story as to why he's not around, okay?"

"Can we justâ€¦ Can we just eat and not make fun of each other. Please?" asked Treetrunks in her gentle little voice. She took a bite from a strawberry and met Hope's eyes with her brown ones. Her blonde bangs fell over her forehead and covered her left eye, completing her 'innocent little lamb' imagery. "I mean, you guys can do that later, if you want."

"Yeah," said Hope. She took a bite from her bread. "So Destiny's staying the week-end. She'll be there for the exams."

"Destiny's gonna be there?!" exclaimed Snublout. He rushed to his feet and jumped back on Fireworm. "It was nice insulting you, as always, Derek. I have to go work on my technique."

"What for?" asked Darren, taking a bite from a chicken leg. "You're



never gonna impress her."

"Speak for yourself, Darren," said Snublout. He took to the air. "See you around, suckers."

"Good riddance," said Derek when Snublout was out of earshot. "Well, let's get back to the food."

No one argued with that. The remaining five and their dragons lazed around for two hours, eating, drinking, talking, and laughing until the horn signalling the beginning of the exams blew. It was time to make their families proud.

## 7. The Ring

After everyone had gathered in either the viewer's standing zone or in the ring, the exams began. The senior class, about a dozen or so teens, lined up with their dragons. They'd be tested in five areas, control, accuracy, force, speed, and intelligence. That was both the students and the dragons. At the end of the official test, the students would then be given the opportunity to show off a routine they'd prepared. They would be given additional points based on how well they performed the routine. Hope was mainly worried that she hadn't practiced the routine enough. She realized that sitting astride on Sugar's back was quite possibly one of the worst places to be concerned about malpractice. She kept hearing Destiny's voice in the back of her mind.

The last time Destiny had visited, Hope had showed her the routine she'd put together. She thought that she had just the right amount of practice into it all those weeks ago, but Destiny had said that it was a little amateur for how well Hope was with Sugar. Destiny assured her that with more practice, she'd nail it and beat out everyone. Hope had practised almost relentlessly since then, to assure that hers was the very best it could be. Magnus had said that no matter how hard she practised, she wasn't going to be at the top of the class. Hope had, of course, ignored him.

Since Hope was the chief's daughter, it was customary for her to go last in every category. This meant that she could watch everyone else do a good job and have a panic attack about how unprepared she felt. The first test, the one about how well a person could control their dragon, was one that Hope was none too worried about. She was rather amused to watch the others control their dragons. Of course, Boulder did anything that Treetrunks wanted him to do, which included not devouring the pile of rocks in front of him. Gronckles tended to be more loyal and obedient than any other species.

Darren managed to keep Spit from dissolving seven of the twelve dummies set up for his test. Freya used the same test track as Darren, as each one was specified to the different species of dragon. The ones that spit things were given dummies; Gronckles was rocks, and so on.

Freya wasn't as successful as Darren. Fjord blasted all but the last one with scalding water. Freya didn't really seem to care that she flunked the control part of the test.

Derek had to keep Jack from rolling around in a huge pile of sawdust,

because Timberjacks had a natural impulse to cover themselves in sawdust for some reason. He succeeded, as Hope had guessed he would.

Snublout was only a tiny bit better than his father had been with Hookfang at controlling Fireworm. Meaning that he didn't pass that portion of the test. Fireworm couldn't resist the urge to set fire to all of the dummies in the ring, and Snublout clearly didn't care about the outcome. Hope wasn't worried about the control part of the test. She knew she could keep Sugar from firing spikes at the birds they set free in the ring.

Next; accuracy. Tree trunks and Boulder aced that one, with Boulder hitting the targets at his highest speed. Granted, that speed wasn't very high. It was impressive for a Gronckle, anyways. The other kids showed off, some succeeding and hitting all if not most of the targets. Hope did one of her father's favourite moves, where Sugar went into a midair roll and fired her spikes with deadly accuracy. Hope got the top score in that segment. Force wasn't difficult, since all of the dragons had a certain amount of strength. Speed was actually unfair, since each dragon had different max speeds. Tree trunks came last with Derek in the lead. Intelligence was easy, Hope won by a landslide, since aside from the Night Fury, Nadders were the smartest species of dragon.

Finally, the time came for the routines. Hope was far too busy with stressing about her routine to pay attention to the other's scores or routines. Hope took her bow to the 'emergency bunker' Ruffnut and Tuffnut had built from the old dragon pens and practiced her archery. She knew that she was a sure shot, but the act of firing the arrow forced her nerves to calm themselves. Her breathing became steady and her heart rate slowed as she drew back the string of her cedar wood bow. Her hand tensed around the imprint left behind on the leather grip from every time she'd done the same before. The purple feathers grazed her cheek lightly and she released the string. With a twang and a faint whistle, the arrow flew to the straw target and lodged itself firmly in the center dot. She had expected as much. She just hoped she could do the same while in the air, moving at high speeds.

The order in which the graduates presented their routines was alphabetical right up to Hope. She was last, under all circumstances. It was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage. Either people would prefer the performance of one who had gone before her, or her performance would wrap up the show with a dazzling finale. She wanted to make her father proud, but she had an odd feeling that something wasn't going to go exactly right. She knew it was probably nothing, she would do just fine. When her name was called, Hope strode out from the bunker and smiled with pride, waving grandly to anyone who caught her eye.

Hope was just about to pull herself up into Sugar's saddle when a piercing scream came from the assembled group above the dragon ring. Hope's eyes searched for the one who had screamed. The only person she could see cowering and pointing with a shaking finger was Snublout. Hope was confused for a fraction of a second because his scream had sounded undeniably female, but once Hope saw what he was pointing at the laughter and witty comment that was waiting at the tip of her tongue vanished. As Fishlegs would have said, chances of survival felt as though they were dwindling into single digits.

## 8. Race From Dragon Island

Moments after the panic began to spread to the crowd, the sun was blotted out by the sheer number of dragons in the air. Hope was used to occasional swarms and the Snoggletog migration, but those all paled in comparison to the sheer numbers in the sky above them. The other dragons snarled and roared, telling the villagers these were not tamed and friendly dragons. Hope locked eyes with her father and she held up three fingers with a questioning look on her face. Hiccup nodded and held up three fingers. Hope nodded in return and ran back into the emergency bunker. Three fingers meant plan C. Plan C was if a massive and possibly hostile force that couldn't be reasoned with came to Berk. The first thing to do was get the children inside. That wasn't Hope's job. That was up to Astrid and the other mothers. The second part was to find a way to neutralize the force without inflicting too much harm.

Hope grabbed her father's shield from the bunker and rushed back out into the ring, leaping on Sugar's back in a single stride. Sugar, sensing the danger, took to the air as the villagers scrambled around. The women led the children down into the emergency bunker, and the men reached for their weapons and leapt on their dragons. Hope and Sugar flew over to Hiccup, who was standing just in front of the chief's chair. Hope leapt off of Sugar's back and Hope handed her father his shield.

"Dad, where did they come from?" asked Hope, her eyes flickering to the fast approaching mass of dragons. "Do you think they could be Gran's?"

"If they were Gran's dragons, then Toothless wouldn't be growling like that. Neither would Sugar or Stormfly," said Hiccup. He pulled Inferno from its sheath and Sugar sparked just enough to set the blade aflame. "No, I think these dragons are from Dragon Island."

"But the wild dragons on that island are extremely territorial, they wouldn't abandon their territory for anything under normal circumstances," said Hope. "Even if they were being threatened, what could be so terrible to have scared them away from their nests?"

Hiccup gave Hope a look of both sadness and fear, one that said what neither of them wanted to hear. He didn't know. He didn't know the answer and he was very frightened by the lingering of uncertainty in the question. He pulled Hope in for a hug, because he knew that if this was going to be the last time he saw her, he didn't want to regret holding her one last time. Of course, the chances of them not being able to sort this out without major casualties were very slim, but he never knew. Hope gave her father a brave smile when he pulled away and climbed back into her saddle, going to round up her friends. Hiccup and Toothless, united again in battle, followed the stream of Vikings flying up to meet the horde of dragons.

Hope wanted to join in the investigation, but Hiccup had expressly told her not to do anything so stupid until she knew exactly what she was doing. Unfortunately for Hiccup, Hope had two generations of the most wilful and stubborn Vikings in existence in her family. She

certainly wasn't going to know how to defend herself in a fight unless she was actually in a fight. This was her one chance to find out what it was like. Hope, loading another arrow, but keeping her bow in a lowered neutral position, followed the others.

For a terrifying moment, she thought the dragons were attacking the front lines, but then she realized something. The dragons were paying absolutely no mind to the Vikings at all; only going around them in whatever way was fastest. Hiccup had only seen that once before, at the dragon nest when he was fifteen. The dragons then had been running for their lives, and these ones appeared to be doing the same. They weren't hostile, they were frightened. They only had to make sure the dragons didn't decide to land in the village.

"Reel them in men, we have to lead them away from Berk and to a safe location!" shouted Hiccup over the squalor of the dragons and cries of those below. "Do not injure the dragons!"

The people began to form a ring around the mass of dragons, with hopes to guide them away. Hope wondered how she was supposed to comply with that order without her father seeing her. She decided to go a little bit beneath everyone else. The dragons, in their panic, blindly followed without even knowing they were being led. They flew past Berk and away over churning grey sea until they reached another island similar to Dragon Island. Leading them down out of the air was easier than Hiccup thought it was going to be. A few of the smaller ones, exhausted from the flight, which had been a few hours at the least, settled down on the island immediately. The bigger dragons followed, however the biggest just kept flying, clearly not worried about rest for a long time. The Vikings landed when the other dragons did, hoping that with their dragon taming abilities, they might be able to calm the dragons. The wild dragons with a bit of strength left in them ran or flew off into the foliage, not wanting to have to go through a fight. The more tired ones could be appeased with fish.

"Why did they leave their island?" asked Fishlegs, his voice sounding nervous. "Hiccup, they only leave the island for the Snoggletog migration. I've never seen this many dragons this shaken up."

"I know, neither have I," said Hiccup, tending to a young Nadder. The mother was nearby, eating fish and keeping a wary eye on the strangers. "I haven't seen them like this since the Green Death."

"Is it the Green Death again?" asked Tuffnut, raising a hand. "I could take him on another time."

"Tuffnut, we killed the Green Death," said Hiccup, pressing his palm to his face. "Remember? I lost a foot, nearly died and whatnot?"

"So it's the Green Death, but now it's a zombie," said Tuffnut, stroking his chin. "Awesome. I've always wanted to kill a zombie."

"Tuffnut, I am one hundred percent positive that the thing that scared these dragons was not the Green Death come back to life as a zombie," said Hiccup in a controlled calm tone. Tuffnut gave Hiccup a confused look, but Hiccup didn't let him say anything else stupid. "There's only one way to find out what scared off these dragons. We

have to go to Dragon Island."

"What?!" exclaimed Hope, unable to hold in her outburst upon hearing those words. Hiccup's eyes found Sugar, her saddle empty because Hope was pushing her way to the front of the crowd. She didn't notice Valka mixed in among the others, she thought that her Gran was back home with Astrid and Magnus. Hope finally shouldered her way the group and in front of Hiccup. "Dad, you can't be serious."

"Hope! What did I tell you about following me on my missions?" asked Hiccup, rising to his feet. "And what do you mean, I can't be serious?"

"If something makes the entire dragon population of an island run away, it's never for a nice reason," said Hope, plating her hands on her hips. "Seriously, I've heard some crazy ideas come out of you before, but a suicide mission has never been one."

"She's right," said Valka, stepping out of the crowd and resting a hand on Hope's shoulder. "Hiccup, it was all well and dandy for you to do stupid things when you were young, but you have responsibilities now. You're the chief; you have to decide what's best for your people. Above that, you're a father, so you have to think of your family first."

"Mum, I know. I am thinking about my people and my family," said Hiccup, gesturing to the horizon where the dragons had come from. "Whatever is on Dragon Island is big. If it's hostile, we need to stop it before it decides to move on to bigger things. Also, we need to get the dragons back their island; they've lived there for centuries, nearly undisturbed."

"And what if it doesn't go according to your plan?" asked Hope, crossing her arms across her chest. She felt empowered by her grandmother's support, and the thought that her mother would've sided with them as well. "What then, Chief?"

"I don't know," said Hiccup, knowing that if he gave them anymore time to talk, they'd convince him not to go. He climbed on Toothless' saddle and looked to the crowd. "Anyone who has the true Viking spirit, with me. Anyone else, back to Berk with the two hard-headed women I am forced to love."

"Dad, come on!" groaned Hope, throwing her arms up in exasperation. "What am I supposed to tell Mom? You know she's gonna kill you when you come back."

"In all likeliness," said Hiccup without a shred of doubt or sarcasm. He looked over them to see how many men were going to be joining him. It was enough for a strike force, which was all that was necessary. He returned his attentions to the women in front of him. "Hope, you tell you mother and brother that I did what I had to, and that I love them. I love you both. Mum, you know where I keep the letters. You know what to do with them ifâ€¦"

He didn't say those last four words, but they lingered in the minds of the listeners long after Hiccup and his men took to the skies again. If I don't come back, he'd meant. Hope wished to all the gods that he hadn't said that. She would've felt a lot better about him leaving. She wasn't concerned for the fact that none of them men had

brought supplies, there were a months worth of supplies in the caves on Dragon Island, just waiting to be needed.

"All the stubborn Viking Stoick ever was," grumbled Valka. She turned her attentions back to the men, of which there were maybe twenty. "Alright, no more gawking and dawdling, off with you. Go back home."

"I take it you aren't going back to Berk with us," said Hope, watching the men mount their dragons and head for home. "I mean, there are dragons that need care and training. That's what you usually do."

"Indeed I do," said Valka. She pulled Hope in for hug. When she let go of Hope, she removed a hemp string from around her neck. The pendant had been hidden under her armour, but Hope could see what it was now. It was a key. Valka placed the key and string around Hope's neck. "The box with the letters to all of his loved ones is in the middle highest cupboard on the left wall in the workshop. This key opens the lock. I'll be back in about a week, since I was going to head off to the valley after you exam anyways."

"My exam!" exclaimed Hope, having nearly forgotten about that afternoon's ordeal. She pressed both palms to her eyelids. "I never got to perform my routine! Now I'll never know if I passed."

"On behalf of the chief, I give you full marks on your final exam," said Valka. "Now get back home and tell your mother what your deranged father has done now."

Hope kissed Valka's weathered cheek and climbed back up into her saddle, following the rest of the stragglers back to Berk. The whole way there, she couldn't stop picturing what it would be like if Hiccup never came home.

## 9. The Beach House

Days passed, and no word from the men. Astrid had done little but grumble to herself about how she never should have married Hiccup in the first place. She kept thinking about all of the times he'd done things like this to her before. He deeply regretted it when he came home, of course, but all of the scolding and sleeping in the barn in the world couldn't stop him from leaving on a stupid and dangerous mission another time. Astrid knew that eventually she'd just have to accept it, but this wasn't the day.

Ever since Hiccup left, Hope spent less and less time out in the village and more in the workshop. At a very young age, Hope had shown a fascination for learning. She'd often walk into the forge and see her father smelting some new creation. She'd always wondered how the lava-like substances he moulded turned into metallic masterpieces, like a replacement for Toothless' tail fin or a pendant for Astrid or a new dagger for Valka. One day, Hiccup decided to teach her how it worked. Even at five, Hope struggled to pick up her father's tools and help out with the creation of the art. Hiccup merely laughed and pulled up a stool for her so she could watch. She knew when to keep away from the heat and sparks, and she knew when she'd have to squint over her father's shoulder into a magnifying glass to see the intricate patterns he was carving. She wondered how he could be so

good at making such tiny details.

As she plunged the red hot blade of her brother's sword into a barrel of icy water, she still wondered that. The only reason Hope had volunteered to fix the sword was to have some time to herself. Even Sugar knew to stay away. She thought of her father, far away on Dragon Island. He had been gone for days, what could be taking so long? Cold fingers closed around her heart when an awful thought struck her. Maybe he was already dead. Maybe whatever had scared off the dragons had gotten him and the other men. Her hammer blows wavered briefly as the horror of the thought settled into her gut. As quickly as it came, she dispelled it. That was ridiculous. It couldn't be that bad. Something scared off the dragons. They were probably already back on their island, and Valka was going to come gliding back to Berk on Cloudjumper. Hiccup and the men would be back within the week, and then everything would go back to normal.

Her father had told her that working at the forge calmed him. He had to focus on the job at hand, leaving no room for the thoughts of whatever was troubling him. The same did not hold true for Hope. The constant hammering stopped being a comforting rhythm and started being a pounding headache. After three hours in front of the forge, Hope set aside her brother's sword to sharpen later and left the workshop, fiddling with the key around her neck. She had been tempted to open the box every now and then, but she felt as though if she read the letters and he was alive, Hiccup would never come back. She knew it was probably just paranoia, but after riding dragons since she was six, she'd learned to always trust her gut.

The day was nice, not a cloud to be seen. She knew that by the evening, it'd be hailing for certain. She revelled in the smell of the salty sea air and the hearty stew that Astrid and Ingrid were making. Hope wished she was going to get to enjoy it hot, but she had to get away from the village and the others for a little while. She didn't even need to ride Sugar for this one. A while back, Alvin and the Outcasts had tried to destroy Berk using Whispering Deaths. The plan had, of course, failed, but the tunnels the Whispering Deaths had made were still open. They were also easy to navigate, once you get a map. Luckily, Ruffnut and Tuffnut, bored on a snowy afternoon, mapped out the entire tunnel system. Naturally, they charged three gold pieces a map and five to enter the tunnel from the main entrance, but Hope could handle that. She already had a map, and five gold was more than a reasonable price for where she was about to go.

As Hope approached the toll booth, she saw that it was neither Ruffnut nor Tuffnut manning it, nor was it Freya or Darren. It was Frigga, Ruffnut and Eret's only daughter. She had her father's complexion and eyes, but her mother's crop of blonde hair. She chose to keep it short and shaggy. She was about Magnus' age. It was no secret that she had a crush on him, but Magnus was far too concerned about himself to notice someone like Frigga. She wasn't loud-mouthed, strong, heroic, or popular, but she was good-hearted. Hope could only dream of having her as a sister-in-law one day.

"Well, look who it is," said Frigga, perking up from her slouching position. Hope smiled in return to Frigga's own bright smile. "If you're headed to the beach house, I must warn you that someone has already asked for specific directions to the secret beach."

"Really?" asked Hope, suddenly on guard. She clutched her coin purse tighter and looked over both of her shoulders. "Who was it? Why did they want to go there?"

"Relax, Hope. It was just Destiny," said Frigga, with a laugh. Hope breathed a sigh of relief and laughed along with Frigga. "She wanted to go watch the dolphins. She said she saw them from a cliff and she wanted to get a closer look."

"Oh, the dolphins are out, are they?" asked Hope. That just made going to the beach house all the more worth it. And having Destiny for company wouldn't hurt. Hope pulled five gold from her coin purse and held it out to Frigga. "Well, that's great to know. Here you go, five gold pieces. Real gold, too."

"Nah, just go on ahead," said Frigga, waving Hope ahead. She sometimes did that, letting her friends get in free. "Mom's never gonna find out I let you through free anyways. I just hope Destiny and the dolphins can undo whatever stress you've been putting yourself through lately."

"Thanks, Frigga," said Hope, smiling gratefully. "Have a great day!"

Frigga called back a reply as Hope headed into the tunnels. Near the entrance was a row of torches, lit and waiting to be needed. Hope grabbed the last one in the row and continued on deeper into the damp, musty tunnels. The only sounds were the muffled thuds of feet overhead, and the occasional trickle of water or shift of dirt or rocks. Hope wondered how on earth it was that Ruffnut and Tuffnut had mapped the tunnels. She would've guessed her dad had done it, seeing as how the maps were accurate and nobody got lost in the tunnels. Somehow, Ruff and Tuff had pulled maybe a week's worth of intelligence out of their sock drawers and put it to use for once.

Hope couldn't help thinking about how different her parent's friends were from each other. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were goofballs, nearly incapable of taking anything seriously. Fishlegs was a big, nerdy, and somewhat uptight walking encyclopedia of dragon facts. Snotlout was a proud narcissist who spent all of his time boasting. Astrid was a violently-inclined warrior queen. Hiccup was an intelligent, crafty, soft-hearted and friendly guy. She wondered how the friendship of the group had lasted so long. Mixing in the fact that Astrid and Hiccup had managed to squeeze a marriage and a family out of their few similarities just boggled Hope's mind. She didn't even want to get started on Ruffnut and Eret.

As she approached the mouth of the tunnel that led to the beach, she wondered if others thought the same about her and Derek. Were they too dissimilar to work out in other people's minds? They shared the same group of friends, but it seemed like the friends were going to be hereditary. After all, they were the second generation of the original Riders of Berk. Derek seemed to have come out of nowhere. Literally. One day his house was empty, the next day, he was living in it. No parents, no siblings, no friends, no family of any kind. Not even a dragon. All he had to his name were the clothes on his back, the house, and a flock of sheep. That had been when he was ten years old. He'd just become another one of Berk's unexplained



mysteries at this point. The only thing she knew about his past was that his mother was dead and his father wanted nothing to do with him. He wouldn't tell why he came to Berk, or where the sheep came from, or where he was born. It was almost like he was hiding it on purpose.

Hope let those ridiculous notions leave her already troubled mind and rounded the final corner. At the end of the tunnel were three holders for the torches. The first one held a recently extinguished torch. Hope dunked her torch in the bucket beneath the torches and placed her now smoking torch in the holder in the center. As she exited the tunnel system, the beach house came into view. It was intended to be the Chief's house for when Hiccup came of age, but Stoick realized that the yard was too small for even one dragon, let alone two, and that the beach itself was too far from the village. Instead of having it removed, Hiccup suggested turning it into a vacation home for him and his future family to visit during nicer weather. That is what it became. Hope's earliest memories were from this beach house. They hadn't been in a while, ever since Magnus declared himself 'too old' for visits to the beach with his family.

Destiny was sitting on the dock, facing the waves. The only thing that was visible to Hope was the back of her crop of long curly black hair and of her dulled periwinkle dress. Hope found it odd that Destiny wore dresses so frequently. On Berk, the girls only wore dresses for the Snoggletog ball or for Freya's Feast, a sort of holiday banquet with music for lovers. Granted, Destiny wasn't from Berk. She was from Outcast Islands. Ever since the truce had been arranged between Stoick and Alvin, the Outcasts had been free to come and go from Berk. That included Destiny and her parents, although her parents accompanied her less frequently as she got older. Destiny's mother, Heather Leon, was good friends with Astrid, which was how Hope and Destiny had met in the first place. Destiny's father, Erik Leon, didn't usually join them on their visits. When he did, Hope realized where Destiny got her hazel eyes.

"Hey, Destiny," said Hope, sauntering across the dock to join Destiny. She looked up and smiled as Hope plunked down. Hope noticed that Destiny had taken off her shoes and was dipping her toes in the frigid water. "I don't know how you can stand to do that. You don't find that water cold?"

"Oh, on the contrary. It's freezing," said Destiny, moving her feet around in a swirling motion. The hem of her skirt hovered a few inches above the lapping water. Hope crossed her legs to keep her leather boots out of the very same water. "I find it keeps me alert and in the moment. When I saw the dolphins in the afternoon light, I couldn't resist dipping my feet in. I didn't want to forget them."

"Destiny, that's very deep and poetic, but you'll catch a cold if you keep that up," said Hope, giggling at her best friend's strange way of speaking. Destiny was just a poetic person. Destiny rolled her eyes and pulled her feet out of the water and back into her simple leather flats. Hope saw the dolphins leap from the waves and smiled. Her dolphins were Hope's favourite thing about the beach house. She felt as though the dolphins came just for her. The sound of all the wind chimes strung up in the trees around them was soothing. "Oh, I could just stay here like this forever. I'd never have to worry about getting married or going off to wars. Nobody would die on me. My dad

would stop rushing off to the rescue every time something didn't seem right. Maybe Magnus would stop being such a brat. You would never have to leave. We could stay like this forever."

"I don't think I should like that," said Destiny, the afternoon sun bathing her face as she looked up at the clouds. "It isn't that I don't care for you or this place, and indeed Magnus can be a burden, but I wish to do something more exciting with what little time I have left on this earth. I should like to fall in love, and if time froze at this instant, it would never happen."

"I suppose," said Hope. She ran her hand over the sea-weathered wood of the dock, careful not to get a splinter. She supposed no matter how awful things might turn out to be, Hope had to dive into it headfirst, ready or not. "Oh well, I guess that's the price of being human. You can't go forward, you can't go backwards, and you can't stop time."

"Indeed, to be mortal is one of life's greatest trials," said Destiny. She turned to look at Hope, a look of sympathy coming over her features. "You are worried for your father, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," said Hope, hanging her head. She took a steadying breath and looked back up. "Destiny, it's been days. What could have happened to them?"

"Fear not, your father is a noble and wise warrior," said Destiny, placing a hand on Hope's shoulder. "He will return to you. He may be wounded when he does, but he will live. I know it."

"Well, that's reassuring enough," said Hope, breathing a sigh. Destiny had just repeated, with grand words, exactly what everyone else had been telling her over the past few days. "Whatever, I came here to get rid of my worries, not to stress out about them even more. Tell me a story, Destiny."

Upon those words, Destiny made up a tale of fantastic proportions. It told the tale of a noble maiden fighting her way back to the throne, wading through the carnage of all those she had slain to save those she loved. Hope thought Destiny's stories had far too much gore or romance, but then again, Destiny was a strange one. The thought of the girl skewering a man through the heart did not help to alleviate her worries about her father.

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, on Dragon Island, Hiccup flopped down on his bedroll for some much needed rest. He'd taken the night watch, something he really shouldn't have done. He was yawning all the way through his report. He didn't have much to report. Every so often, Hiccup would decide that it was time to pack up and leave, but then something so bizarre would happen that Hiccup had to investigate. When the trail went cold, he'd order the pack-up again, but then another thing would happen, and they'd begin all over again. Hiccup had the odd feeling something or someone was trying to keep him here. He knew he'd already been gone long enough to have worried Hope and angered Astrid. He was almost certain Magnus didn't care whether he came back in three days or in three months. He wasn't even sure if Magnus would miss him all that much, but then again, Magnus was just going through his 'I only care about myself' phase. He'd get over it. Unless he

turned into Snotlout. Hiccup didn't know how he'd handle that.<p>

Just as Hiccup's eyes shut, a battle cry startled him into a bolt upright position. Hiccup saw what was coming through the tree line and watched as his men rushed to his defence. Hiccup unsheathed Inferno and was about to join them when Fishlegs stopped him.

"Hiccup, you have to go!" exclaimed Fishlegs. Hiccup gave him a confused look. "You're the chief and you have the only Night Fury. We'll hold the defensive line for as long as we can, but we'll be right behind you if we can't beat them."

"But what about your families?" asked Hiccup. Fishlegs took the Book of Dragons from it's pouch around his waist and handed it to Hiccup. Hiccup's eyes widened with realization. "Fishlegsâ€¦"

"Give it to Treetrunks when you get back to Berk," said Fishlegs, drawing his dagger. "You don't have much time, go!"

Hiccup knew that Fishlegs was wrong. As Chief, he should be on the front lines, not running away from the fight. However, Fishlegs wasn't going to let Hiccup jump into the fight, no matter what. Hiccup, admitting defeat, pulled himself up into Toothless' saddle and belted himself on. He tucked Inferno back in its sheath and stuffed the Book of Dragons into one of the saddle bags. After a regretful look back at the pitiful defensive line, Hiccup took to the skies, guilt weighing down his heart.

The feeling of guilt was replaced my searing agony, coming from his left side. He nearly fainted from the pain, but Toothless steadied him and doubled his speed. He knew that Hiccup had been hurt and he needed to get him home as fast as possible. Hiccup looked down at his side and resisted the urge to gag. Protruding grotesquely from his side was an arrow, blood seeping sluggishly around the sides. More arrows were fired, but it was only the one that had already pierced his flesh that touched him. He took a deep breath and tried to calm his heart rate. If he panicked, his heart would beat faster, and he'd lose more blood. He thought of Hope and Astrid and Magnus, of Valka and Stoick and Ingrid, of Fishlegs and Snotlout and Ruffnut and Tuffnut. He thought of everything he had to live for and vowed to hang on long enough to get home. He winced and bit back a scream when his elbow accidentally grazed the arrow's shaft. He thought of how much Astrid was going to yell at him when he got back instead of the pain. That gave him the courage to go on. For Fishlegs and the men. For his family. For everyone.

## 10. Homecoming

Of course, back on Berk, no one had the faintest idea what had happened on Dragon Island. Valka didn't know her son was losing blood by the second. Hope didn't know the agony ripping through his mind. Astrid didn't know the suffering he felt just sitting and holding on to the saddle. However, after maybe about en minutes, Toothless had Hiccup back on Berk. He was still conscious, but in intense pain.

Hope was still at the beach house. Derek had arrived after a while

and he and Hope got into a heated chess game in the beach house. Destiny sat by and watched, goading each of them on in her funny speech. Hope never would have been aware of Hiccup's return if it weren't for Treetrunks. As soon as Hiccup had arrived, he'd insisted that someone bring the Book of Dragons to Treetrunks. Upon receiving the book and hearing the story, Treetrunks rushed to the Haddock residence, intent on telling Hope the bad news. The only person home was Astrid. Treetrunks asked where Hope was, and then broke the news to Astrid. She rushed to the beach house next, returning with Hope later. Astrid rushed to the doctor's shop, where they had just removed the arrow and were putting a healing salve on it and bandaging it. When Astrid was reassured by the doctor that Hiccup would live to see another battle, she met Hiccup's eyes. The blood drained out of his face, and not because of the wound in his side.

"Hiccup. Horrendous. HADDOCK!" shouted Astrid, walking over to Hiccup with a broad stride. The man bandaging Hiccup's side looked at Astrid's red face and hurriedly finished what he was doing before rushing from the room, slamming the door behind him. Hiccup gulped and met Astrid's eyes. "Okay, first, you were gone for days. Second, you come home without any of the men. Third, YOU ARE PARTIALLY BLEEDING TO DEATH!"

"Astridâ€|" said Hiccup, flinching from her last shout. She stood in front of him, hands on her hips, chest heaving with her heavy breaths. Her expression said 'Well?'. Hiccup gulped and took a deep breath. "Astrid, I'm sorry."

"Damn right, you're sorry!" exclaimed Astrid, crossing her hands across her chest. "What am I supposed to tell Stoick? Valka? Magnus? \_Hope?\_"

"Hopeâ€|" Gods, she's probably thinking the worst," said Hiccup, realization dawning on him. Astrid's expression began to soften when she saw him flinch and heard him curse under his breath, hands moving to cover the bandaged area. "Where is she?"

"At the beach house," said Astrid, taking another step forward. Hiccup flinched again, but in anticipation of pain instead of because of pain. Astrid instead fell to her knees at the foot of the chair and folded her arms across his lap. She smirked upon thinking about how he was going to have a scar. Yet another one. That was okay, she loved men with scars. "Hiccup, I'm sorry I yelled at you, but you have to see things from my perspective. No word from you for days, and then you come back bleeding half to death. And alone at that? What was it? What was on that island?"

"Astrid, it wasâ€|" Hiccup was cut off by the door Astrid had slammed shut flying open. Their heads whirled to see Hope standing in the doorway. She rushed to Hiccup and wrapped her arms around him, revelling in the relief she'd been looking forward to upon doing so. "Hope!"

"Don't you ever scare me like that again, Daddy," said Hope, pulling back just enough to meet his eyes. Hiccup reassuringly. She only called Hiccup Daddy when she was feeling very emotional, no matter what emotion that would be. "I trust Mom already yelled at you. I'm just relieved that you're alive."

"Umâ€¦ I don't wanna seem rude, butâ€¦ what about my dad?" asked Fishlegs, standing in the doorway clutching the Book of Dragons to her chest like a lifeline. Her throat closed up, choking her next words. "Is heâ€¦ Is he gone?"

"The last time I saw him, he was alive and fighting fit," said Hiccup, causing Treetrunks to loosen her grip on the book. "I don't know why he asked me to give you the book. When he comes back, you'll have to give it to him."

"If he comes back," said Derek, watching from just behind Treetrunks. All eyes went to him as soon as the comment sunk in. Treetrunks turned around slowly with a broken and panicked look on her face. Derek held up his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, that was quite possibly one of the stupidest things I've said in my life. Pay no attention to me."

"Now, as I was saying," said Hiccup, focusing his attentions back on Astrid. "Astrid, it was Haggard."

"Hâ€¦ Haggard?" said Astrid in disbelief. Hope's jaw went slack and Treetrunks' eyes went wide. Derek's own features took on a panicked and somewhat guilty expression. "Haggard? Haggard the Cruel?"

"Yes, him," said Hiccup. Astrid stood up and began massaging her temples and pacing. "I know! I thought he was dead too!"

"You and Toothless dropped him in the waters at Glacier Bay at high tide, how the hell could he have survived that?" asked Astrid, the disbelief obvious in her voice. "Haggard. Haggard and his men. And you just left the rest of your strike force on Dragon Island?"

"Astrid, Fishlegs insisted," said Hiccup. "And besides, it's hardly like this is the first time we've faced him."

"Daddy, it was a mistake to go to Dragon Island," said Hope, pacing with her hand on her chest. "They wouldn't have seen you. If they hadn't seen you, maybe they would've been happy with Dragon Island. Now, they won't stop until they've burned Berk to the ground, killed everyone on it, and scorched the earth so that any survivors could never come back."

"You're positive it was Haggard the Cruel?" asked Derek, his tone sort of panicky. Hiccup looked over at him and nodded. "Well, this just became awkward. And it has put me on the spot."

"Why?" asked Hope, turning to face him. "What does any of this have to do with you?"

"None of it has anything to do with me," said Derek in a rushed voice. He began to back out of the room. "If you'll excuse me, I have some things I have toâ€¦ umâ€¦ Yeah. See ya around."

With that, Derek hopped on Jack and flew off, but not towards his house. Hope ran to the doorway and watched as he flew off in the same directions that the flock of dragons had come from so many days ago. Hope's eyebrows knit together and he turned to face the other three.

"I have no idea what that was," said Hope. The others said words of agreement and Hope looked back out at the horizon. Derek was still heading towards Dragon Island, but now there were more silhouettes in the distance. It appeared to be most of the strike force. Hope whirled around. "Dad, they're coming back! The men! They're coming back!"

Treetrunks ran to Hope's side and smiled when she saw her father and Meatlug among the numbers. It was only a matter of minutes before everyone was back on the island. Most of them headed straight for the doctor's. Treetrunks slam-hugged Fishlegs and gave him back the Book of Dragons. Hope still couldn't get over Derek. Why had he panicked? She could understand panic; after all, Hiccup had been attacked by a man who was supposed to be dead. But there had been something else in his tone. Guilt. What did Derek have to be guilty about? And why had he headed straight for Dragon Island?

She would've followed him, but there were other things to deal with. Hope took it upon herself to comfort those who lose loved ones to the battlefield. There weren't many men who hadn't come home, but the sorrow was still deep. There were parents mourning their child, widows mourning their husbands, and children mourning their fathers. Hope was going to have a long day.

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><p><strong>Author's Note: Sorry, it's short, I know. It's supposed to be a little teaser. Go ahead, get mad at me. All will be revealed next chapter!<strong>

## 11. Haggard the Cruel

Derek knew he had been conspicuous. Someone was bound to question why he'd want to go to DragonIsland when there was a dead man walking there, but he had to. Someone, anyone, had to try to find out what Haggard wanted. Upon arriving on DragonIsland, he told Jack to stay out of sight and to listen if Derek shouted. Derek kept his hand on the hilt of his dagger until he spotted Haggard's camp through the foliage.

There were about five tents set up around a large bonfire. The men were sitting around the bonfire, roasting some kind of birds and loudly boasting about how many lives they'd each taken that day. Many were spouting tales of gore and severed limbs, of pleas for mercy that went unanswered. Derek took a deep breath and stepped out from the foliage. The attention of all of the men instantly shifted from the tales and food to him. Only a few drew their weapons. The rest broke into crooked grins. Derek's hand rested uncertainly on his sword hilt, unsure of what would happen next.

"Well, well, well," said one of the tanned, scarred men, setting down his food and standing. The men sheathed their weapons as recognition flickered across their faces. The man gave a sly grin and began to circle Derek. "If it ain't the little runt who ran away! How have things been? Where have you been hiding? Heard any news from your mum?"

"No. No, I haven't," said Derek, standing nearly statuesque. His jaw gave the slightest clench at the mention of his mother. He knew

better than to show weakness around Haggard's men, but a lump formed in his throat anyways. He didn't swallow or clear his throat, he simply relaxed. The lump vanished seconds later. "Listen, I didn't come for banter. I need to speak with Haggard."

"You? Speak with Haggard?" asked the man. The throng of men burst into uproarious laughter. Derek clenched his hand around the hilt of his sword. It was as close to clenching his fist as he could get without becoming a target. "Boy, Haggard hasn't wanted to speak with you since you was a small fry. What makes you think he'd listen to you? More likely, he'd gut you alive before you got the chance to say a word."

"Because," said Derek, rolling up the sleeve of his wool shirt. He held his forearm out and showed the man the small dragon skull and crossed sword emblem scarred onto it. "I'm still an Outlander. I'm still part of Haggard's personal guard."

"You? You lost that title when you went and ran off with our flock of sheep!" exclaimed the man, drawing his sword. He glowered down at Derek. "Maybe we ought to save Haggard the trouble and kill you now."

"Try it," dared Derek, drawing his own weapon. "I've been taking lessons from the finest swordsman in all the land."

"Now, now," said a rough, deep voice, from behind Derek. He cringed before realizing that he hadn't shouted. Haggard the Cruel loved to shout. Derek turned around to face the tall, muscular man. Oddly, he wasn't as scarred or tanned or grimy as the men. Most women were almost instantly smitten with him, with his strong jawline, messy black hair, and sensible stubble. He radiated dark charisma, with the fire of hatred burning behind his brown eyes. "I think I'd rather handle this one myself, Modoc."

"Yes, sir," said Modoc, sheathing his weapon and backing away. He shot Derek a crocodile grin, like the idea of watching Haggard destroy him was more fun than having the privilege himself.

"Well, fancy seeing you here," said Haggard, crossing his muscular arms across his chest. "Odd as well, since most people still believe me to be dead. How did you know I was here?"

"I've been looking for you. When I heard that that wretched cur of a chief tried to kill you, I came searching," lied Derek. The moment the words had left his mouth, he realized how flimsy the story sounded. Just as Haggard was likely about to ask why Derek had even bothered looking, Derek spoke. "I just wanted to return home."

"Home. Home, he says," said Haggard, placing his hands on his hips, throwing back his head, and letting out peals of laughter. The other men followed suit, mostly out of fear. Haggard sobered, looked Derek up and down, and then slammed him against the trunk of the nearest tree. He held a dagger to Derek's throat and sneered. "Outland hasn't been your home since I cut your mother's heart from her chest while you watched. Don't lie to me! I know you've been on Berk all these years. I know all about your new life. I know all about that snivelling whore you love so tenderly."

"She's not a snivelling whore. She has more honor and bravery than you'll ever have," growled Derek. He tensed seconds before Haggard's meaty fist slammed into his stomach. Haggard lifted Derek by the front of his shirt and tossed him inches from the bonfire. Derek tried to use the momentum of the fall to return to his feet, but two sweaty men grabbed onto his arms. Haggard landed a blow on his jaw. Haggard laid a hand on Derek's chest, pushing him back slowly until the flames of the bonfire were mere millimetres from his back. Derek spat blood from his mouth and glared daggers. "Go on then. Kill me! Kill me just like you killed my mother!"

"Oh, I would. You make it so tempting, you know," said Haggard. He cackled evilly, and removed his hand from Derek's chest. The two men righted him on his feet and pushed him onto his chest, smearing blood and pine needles across his face. Derek rose to his haunches before Haggard grabbed a fistful of his hair at the scruff of his neck, forcing Derek to look at him. "Sadly, you're all I have left. You're the only member of my family that I haven't killed yet. I so rarely show mercy. You should consider yourself lucky that you're my son."

## 12. Mother's Day

**\*\*Author's Note:** I know it's not Mother's Day anymore, but I did start this on Mother's Day, so I don't care. And I also don't care if Vikings celebrated it or not. Without any further ado, a flashback!\*\*

Mother's Day. It was a holiday that Astrid had never given much mind to. Her own mother hadn't liked to celebrate it. Ingrid just wanted Astrid to love her. She didn't need a day to prove it. However, Hiccup was quite different. He and Stoick had showered Valka with gifts and adoration on Mother's Day, before she was carried off. Stoick was much quieter about it after Valka disappeared, only saying a prayer for her when he had a moment alone. Hiccup would still make her breakfast and a flower crown, like he always had. He put them with her empty grave, where he would sit and talk to her picture, carved on a piece of wood. He'd say his own prayer; that Mother would be home soon.

Once Astrid had officially become a mother, Hiccup assured her that no one in his family would live her to sit in the corner and knit quietly all day. Astrid had dismissed it as Hiccup being Hiccup until the day actually arrived. She woke up to the smell of bread, cheese, and fish, the other half of the bed empty. She heard several voices downstairs, the grogginess of waking up keeping her from recognizing them right away. She heard footsteps on the stairs before the door to the bedroom creaked open. Hiccup poked his head in, a ridiculous grin plastered across his face.

"I told you," said Hiccup. He entered the room, carrying a plate laden with all the things she'd smelled before. There were also a handful of blueberries. Hiccup placed the plate on her lap and sat on the end of the bed. "I told you that there was no escape from the Mother's Day celebrations."

"Hiccup, I appreciate all of this, but please," said Astrid, placing a hand on Hiccup's. "Promise me that you won't do anything over-the-top today."



"Oh, I won't. I'm not even going to be involved. I'm going to stay here and take care of Hope," said Hiccup. He took Astrid's hand in his own and kissed it, making her smile. "You and the other mothers downstairs are going to head out and take a day off. Worry not, Milady. I thought of everything."

"Who is here, anyways?" asked Astrid, taking a bite of the bread. "You know, besides you and Hope."

"Mom, Ingrid, Siri, Brunhilda, and Estelle. Also, Dad, Erik, Snotlout, and Tuffnut," said Hiccup, ticking each of them off on his fingers. "Fishlegs and Rosethorn aren't going to be here. Their baby is going to be born any day, with Fishlegs' luck, it'll happen when he's the least prepared. However, I and the other fathers are going to take care of the babies."

Astrid made a face at the thought. Three first-time fathers and two veteran fathers in one house, trying to take care of four babies. Sure, the fathers outnumbered the babies by one, but Astrid still didn't see it going over too well. Although, she'd finally get a break from being a caretaker for a few hours. After the first month of heart-stopping anxiety about whether or not she'd pull through, Hope went from being quiet and easy to care for to crying nearly all day, needing to be fed and changed every half an hour. After thinking about it, she realized she might actually want to stay and watch, for the laughs.

"Okay," said Astrid at last. She continued eating, swatting Hiccup when he swiped some of her blueberries. He just popped them in his mouth and smirked. Once she finished eating, Hiccup took her plate and kissed her forehead. "Go on, I'm gonna get dressed and then I'll come downstairs."

Hiccup nodded and continued on downstairs, the realization that he was going to be alone with a few fathers and four infants hitting him at last. Maybe he should've thought this through a little more. It was too late now, of course. He only thought things through after he'd made the arrangements. After washing the plate, he put it back in the cupboard and went into the living room. The mothers had left while he was washing the dish, and, unfortunately, so had Erik (Ruff and Tuff's father) and Stoick. Which meant that there were now more babies than caretakers. Perfect.

"Uh, Hiccup," said Tuffnut, trying to hold both of his children at once. "How do you do this parent thing for extended periods of time?"

"Umâ€¦ I'm not sure," said Hiccup, looking around the room at the babies and two clueless fathers. "Remember, I'm new at this, too."

"Yeah, but you always just know stuff," said Snotlout, looking down at Snublout as though he were a ticking time bomb. "Not that I think you're any better than me. I just wanna use you."

"Yeah, I never would've thought anything else," replied Hiccup, picking Hope up from the little fenced-in blanket bundle he'd invented so that she could be downstairs without needing to be held. "Okay, I know none of us are exactly prime parents, but I guess this

is the time to practise. After all, it's not like we're only going to have one child."

"Nope," said Tuffnut, still attempting to cradle both babies efficiently. "Estelle wants to have a small army. Actually, I wanna have a small army of children. Almost the same thing, right?"

"Yeah, whatever you say Tuff," said Snotlout, rolling his eyes. Seconds later, Snublout began to snuffle. Gradually, it became louder and louder. Snotlout's expression changed to panicked. "No. No, don't do that. Please. Gods, no."

Despite Snotlout's protests, Snublout burst into tears, waking Hope and causing her to begin wailing as well. For good measure it seemed, Darren and Freya joined in. Hiccup made a pained expression and began rocking Hope, trying to stop her cries. The effort was fruitless. If anything, she screamed louder. Hiccup shot Snotlout a 'nice going' look and then refocused his attentions on Hope. It was then that he truly realized that they were all in way over their heads.

Meanwhile, the ladies were lounging up at AngelPointPark, laughing at parenting stories that they were each sharing. Brunhilda was telling one about how Snotlout confused a rattle for a pacifier.

"And then I walked into the nursery and saw Snotlout trying to get Snublout to put his little rattle in his mouth!" Brunhilda said with a laugh. The others laughed as well, picturing the scene vividly. "So I asked him 'What on earth are you doing?' and he says 'He won't take the pacifier!' so I said 'That's because that's his rattle!' You should've seen his face!"

"Stoick once tried to do the exact same thing with Hiccup," said Valka, still reeling with laughter. "Of course, I slapped him for it. I suppose I could've gone a little easier on him. He was a first-time father."

"Oh, I've got one!" exclaimed Siri, giving Ruffnut (who had joined the group as they were on their way to the park) a look. Siri snorted out a laugh at the memory. "Did I ever tell you about the time Ruff and Tuff decided it would be a good idea to wear eels as scarves?"

"Mom, please don't," said Ruffnut, her face taking on a pained expression. "We were five, leave it be."

"Hey, if you don't like it, you could always go to my house," said Astrid, giving her a smug look. "I'm sure the men would just love your company. I'd imagine they're like fish out of water over there."

"You know what? I will go to your house," said Ruffnut. She stood and glared at the others, who were practically all giggling. "I may never want to be a mother, but I have so much mothering crammed into my head thanks to you, Mom. I'm not gonna pass up the chance to show up my brother."

"Hang on, hang on," said Valka, her voice taking on a slightly apologetic tone. She stood up and trailed after Ruffnut. "I'll come with you. They're going to need the expertise of a mother."

"What if they're hungry? What do we do then?" asked Snotlout, speaking over the cries of all four infants. "We're not exactly equipped to feed babies!"

"I don't know!" snapped Hiccup, cradling Hope and trying in vain to silence her. "I honestly have no idea what to do here! Happy, Snotlout? Happy that I'm finally stumped?"

"Have no fear!" said a gruff voice from the door. Hiccup turned and saw Ruffnut and Valka standing in the open doorway. It was Ruffnut who had spoken. "The women are here!"

"Oh, thank the gods!" said Tuffnut. He stood and placed one of his children in each woman's arms. "I love them to pieces, but I have limits."

With that he walked out of the house, shouting over his shoulder that he'd come back to get them later. Ruffnut sighed and cradled Darren closer to her chest, a smile beginning to form at the corners of her mouth. He began to quiet slightly. Valka set Freya down in the 'baby cage', as Hiccup liked to call it, and dashed up the stairs. After a moment, she returned, holding a box in her hands. Hiccup, Snotlout and Ruffnut watched as she pulled four pacifiers from the box. She popped on in each of the babies mouths. Silence followed. Sweet, sweet silence after nearly an hour of wailing and crying. Snotlout sighed in relief.

"I never thought I'd say this, but thank the gods that you showed up, Mrs. Haddock," said Snotlout, a look of relief washing over his features. "That's the only time I'll ever say it, so just accept it so we can all forget I ever said anything."

"Well then, you're welcome, Snotlout," said Valka with a laugh, picking Freya up again. She turned to Hiccup. "If ever a situation like that occurs again and you don't know what to do, the solution is likely in the box. I planned everything when I furnished the nursery."

"Huh," said Hiccup, looking down at Hope. A knock at the door caused him to look back up. Stoick and Erik entered, smiles nearly lost in their beards. "And where did you two go?"

"Not very far," said Stoick, stifling a laugh. "We just wanted to see how long you'd last without the ladies. You held on longer than I thought you would."

Erik sighed and took Darren from Ruffnut, seeing that his son was gone. Ruffnut looked slightly shocked, as though she had rather enjoyed holding him. To compensate, she took Freya gently from Valka.

"C'mon, Dad," said Ruffnut, heading out of the door. "Let's take them to Tuff's house."

"Ruffnut waved good-bye and the two walked off. Snotlout left as well, after a while. Stoick offered to take Hope, to make up for abandoning Hiccup that afternoon, but Hiccup declined. Astrid came back about an hour after Stoick left. She found Hiccup and Valka seated on the couch, deep in conversation while Hope dozed in

Hiccup's arms. Astrid curled up on the couch next to Hiccup, resting her head on his shoulder. Hiccup and Valka continued to talk, Astrid adding to the conversation every now and then.

"Alright, I've been kind of avoiding this question since I found you," said Hiccup, wrapping an arm around Astrid's shoulders while cradling Hope with the other. "You were with the dragons for twenty years. You trained them, you flew on them. You could've come back at any point. Why didn't you?"

"Oh, dear," said Valka. She took a deep breath and then exhaled loudly. "I didn't come back because I had to keep rescuing the dragons from Drago. If I hadn't freed them, he would've easily defeated us. We only defeated him because I kept setting the dragons free instead of returning to Berk. It's not as though I didn't want to. I thought of you and your father every day."

"I guess I can understand that, but it doesn't really make up for all the times I wished you had been there," said Hiccup, looking down at Hope. "I mean, I could've used some support growing up. You know, when I was a disappointment to Dad and when I started training Toothless. You really would've made my life easier."

"Then we never would've fallen in love," said Astrid. She placed a kiss on his cheek and Hope's forehead. "And we wouldn't have Hope."

Hiccup smiled, bitter memories making way for the sweeter ones. He kissed Hope's forehead, the top of Astrid's head, and Valka's cheek.

"Happy Mother's Day," said Hiccup, the smile never leaving his face. "To the two most amazing mothers in the whole of the earth."

### 13. LOL, Nope!

Chapter thirteen? Are you crazy? No. No chapter thirteen. That's bad news bears.

### 14. Way Down Below

While Derek was slowly crushed back into the life he'd ran away from, Hope had her mind focused on Magnus' thirteenth name day. Name days are the exact same thing as birthdays, except they are not celebrated on the day of birth. They're celebrated three days after the birth, the day the person was named. On the day of the birth, the family and close friends of the person celebrated quietly. On the name day, especially in the circumstance of anyone in the Haddock family, the whole village celebrated. It was Hope's job to come up with a gift for Magnus from the whole village, but, as you can imagine, this put a lot of pressure on her. She'd decided on a music piece, and practised with the other musicians in the village day and night.

Meanwhile, Magnus himself wasn't the least bit concerned. The only thing he had to do was sit back and look handsome while everyone praised him and honoured him as their future chief. He decided to do a flashy routine on his dragon, Hellhound, a small Stormcutter. On

the morning of his day of birth, he rose with the sun, taking the last banana on his way out. He saddled Hellhound, fed him a few fish, and then soared off in the air. A smile came to his face as the wind rushed through his dark blonde hair and hand-me-down clothing. Up in the air, he felt like he was a god.

He knew that his family was aggravated with him. He knew that every word that came out of his mouth irritated Hope. He knew that no one had high hopes of the chief he'd someday be. He was annoying, like the kid brother he was. So, to compensate, he pretended he didn't care. He covered up any show of emotions with sarcasm or snide comments. He surrounded himself with people he could barely stand and pretended they were the best friends in the world. All so that he could feel like no one was disappointed. Hellhound was the only one Magnus knew didn't judge him. Hellhound was never disappointed when he saw Magnus.

While Magnus flew high in the sky, trying to erase his worries, Frigga sat at the toll booth of the tunnels, watching him. She smiled after checking to see if anyone was watching. She liked Magnus, as was obvious to everyone. She still acted like it was a secret. Hell, even Magnus knew. However, Magnus just blocked her from his mind. So what if one of his parent's friend's daughters liked him? It's not like it meant anything to anyone, even if he couldn't stop doodling the blue ink tattoo on her right wrist in his free time. It was just a mesmerizing design. It had nothing to do with the girl who wore the tattoo.

Days passed, and Hope worried. She was stressed about making the song for Magnus perfect, and she was anxious about Derek. It was hardly the first time he'd flown off into the sunset and not come back for days, but she worried every time. After yet another practise with the village musicians, Hope made the final adjustments to the sheet music, changed a few of the lyrics around, and finally declared the song finished. One final practise, she was certain it'd be perfect. Now all she had to do was find someone to sing it. She'd do it herself, but she was going to be playing her flute during the performance. She couldn't exactly play the flute and sing at the same time. She would figure out the singer later on. At the moment, she needed to get away from her stress.

After a short flight, Hope arrived at Dragon Island Two, as the villagers had so affectionately nick-named the island that the dragons were now residing on. Valka was still there, tending to the dragons and living off the land. Hope wondered why she continued to stay with the dragons when she could've just come home. Then again, Valka was just as at home with the dragons as she was with her family. Hope smiled as a group of baby dragons ran past her, chasing after a butterfly. She shook her head and walked towards the little fort Valka had built for herself. After a quick knock on the wall, Hope lifted the blanket that served as the door and crawled in.

"Valkyrie!" said Valka, a smile creasing her features. She pulled Hope in for a hug then stepped back to take her in. "I expected you to crack and visit me a bit sooner."

"Oh, shush, Gran," teased Hope, rolling her eyes with a smile on her face. "I would've come sooner, but I was busy writing the song for Magnus' name day celebration."

"Is it finished?" asked Valka, sitting down on her makeshift cot.  
"Not to pressure you, but his name day \_is \_tomorrow."

"Well, the lyrics and music are finished," said Hope, plopping down next to Valka. "I just have to find the right person to sing it."

"You'll do fine," said Valka. She rose to her feet and held open the flap of the tent. "And now, I believe we should go back to Berk. I haven't even chosen what I'm going to give to Magnus."

Hope smiled, following her beloved Gran out into the sunlight.

## 15. A Night to Remember

It was too much to bear, the thought that all of Haggard's cruel plans would fall on Berk. Derek knew that he had to do something, or Hope and all of his friends would be killed. He wished he knew what to do, but he was back in his childhood nightmares instead. All of the beating, hollering, and insulting he had feared as a boy had returned. This caused him to question what exactly his motivation for coming to DragonIsland was in the first place. Derek spent his first few days hiding away in his old bedroom while Haggard simply sat back and watched his men plan the invasion of Berk.

The cruelest thing about Haggard the Cruel was that he never had much reasoning behind his rampages; usually it was a simple grudge. Hiccup had tried to kill him, and now he was going to return the favour, simple as that. Maybe he'd take a few women, but Derek doubted it. Thinking about Berk simply caused him to begin forming an escape plan. It took days to piece together, and involved a lot of sneaking around behind Haggard's back. Luckily, Haggard never really paid Derek much attention.

At last, Derek seized the opportunity to sneak off into the foliage while the other men were sleeping. He kept a keen eye out for Jack, who would have stayed nearby despite the length of time that Derek had neglected him. All Derek had to do was find him, and he could fly off and Haggard would be none the wiser until the next morning.

After about an hour of stumbling in the dark and avoiding Haggard's patrollers, Derek found Jack, hanging upside down in a large bunch of trees. Anyone else wouldn't have seen him, but Derek had trained for situations like these, and so had Jack. Derek broke out into a grin. He was one step closer to going home. One step closer to his friends. One step closer to Hope.

"Jack, do you know what I'm going to do when I get to Berk?" asked Derek quietly. Jack looked to Derek in response. Derek chuckled and climbed onto the saddle. "I'm gonna get everyone off the island. Haggard's gonna look there for me first. No one will be there, though. And then, I'm gonna defend those people with my life. After all, I'll be the one who put them in danger in the first place. It's only right."

With that, Derek took to the skies as quickly as possible. He wanted to give Haggard's men the smallest chance of spotting him. After all,

if they shot him down, it was game over. Thankfully, he wasn't sighted, and he made a clean get away. As the wind ruffled his hair, he greeted the sensation as though it were an old friend. The crashing waves and salty sea air brought back countless memories of the beach house, of Hope, of home. That was all closer now. He was almost homeâ€”|

That same moment, Hope was in her bed, tossing and turning. The oak slats were never all that comfortable to begin with, but this particular night, they were especially unpleasant. With a sigh, Hope threw off the grey wool blanket and sat upright. If this night was to be a sleepless one, she wasn't going to waste it under a stuffy blanket. She still had to do some work on the dagger and sheath she was preparing for Magnus' name day. She had only two things left to do, sew a strap onto the sheath and set rubies on either side of the dagger. As much as Magnus irritated her, Hope didn't want to disappoint him.

Hope reached for the candlestick on her workbench and struck one of the matches from the box next to it. A small glow illuminated the room, making the mess of papers on the bench come into focus. Hope lit the candle and then blew out the match. She opened the door to her room, trying to be as silent as possible. Still, the door creaked anyways. Hiccup was always saying he'd fix the hinges, but he never did. Something else always took up his time instead.

With the floorboards creaking and groaning with every step, Hope made her way down the stairs and out the front door. After shutting the heavy door behind her, Hope travelled up the hill and towards the center of the town. Once she reached the cobblestone paths, her little candle was rendered pathetic by the torches lining the streets. Still, she'd need the candle to light the torches back at the forge. As she crossed the bright, lonesome paths she caught sight of a shape, lithe and unmistakably reptilian. She heard a familiar warble and a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. From the darkness came Toothless, and almost accusatory look on his face.

"What, you've never seen me go to the forge at ungodly hours before?" asked Hope, a teasing tone in her voice and her free hand on her hip. Toothless warbled again, looking in the direction of the house. "No, Toothless, I'm not going back home just yet. I couldn't sleep, so I'm just going to finish Magnus' dagger. If you want, you could come with me. I could use your help getting the forge hot."

Toothless made a sound almost like a sigh and followed her to the stone building. Toothless had always been a caretaker to Hope and Magnus. He could ground either of them just as easily as Hiccup or Astrid could, and he never failed to be the first to know where the two children were and what they were up to. When she and Magnus were much younger, they had gotten lost in the woods. They'd set off to find some knot blossoms, at Astrid's request. She needed some to season the fish she was preparing for dinner. Unfortunately, neither of the siblings knew the woods well enough. They'd found the knot blossom, but what they couldn't find was their way back to the house. It was Toothless that found them, in the end. They'd been so glad to see him. He'd let the two ride on his back and he carried them home, where Hiccup and Astrid were beside themselves with worry. As a result, Hope never thought of Toothless as an animal or pet ever again. She saw her knight in shining armour when she looked at him,

and he saw a little girl that needed his protection. Toothless was no longer Hiccup's dragon, he was a part of the family.

Once they'd arrived at the forge, Hope lit the torches that lined the walls with her candle. The crackle of the straw was the only sound besides the distant lapping of the waves for a moment. With one small blast, Toothless had the black coals of the forge glowing bright orange and sending off wafts of heat. He stayed out of Hope's way as she began shaping the two rubies into small, smooth ovals. For once, the soft thudding of her hammer soothed Hope. Try as she might to stay completely focused on the rubies, her thoughts wandered to Derek. She'd tried the whole not worrying thing, but she couldn't ignore the length of time he'd been away anymore. It had been several days now. Where was he? Was he alright, wherever he was?

Unbeknownst to Hope, she wouldn't have to wonder for much longer. Derek was swooping inland at that exact moment. He saw the glow seeping from the forge and knew that that was where he had to go. It was only ever Hope or Hiccup in the forge at an hour like this, and Derek wanted to speak with either one of them. Whoever was in that forge, be it Hope or Hiccup, he was glad.

Hope had just finished setting the rubies on either side of the dagger when a knock at the wooden archway caught her attention. She was expecting Hiccup or Astrid, possibly even Gobber or Valka, but when she set down the dagger and turned she saw that it was neither her friends nor her family come to tell her she should be sleeping. Instead, it was the boy she'd been silently cursing just moments before. He smiled and Hope rushed to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her head in his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head on top of hers. He'd been waiting for this moment. For days now, he'd been looking forward to this exact moment, when the two would see each other again. After a moment, Hope finally spoke.

"Where were you?" asked Hope, head still on his shoulder. "We were all so worried."

"I know. I'm so sorry, I would've come home if I could've," said Derek. He pulled back and placed a kiss on Hope's lips. He set his hands on her shoulders and smiled reassuringly, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes. "Hope, I need you to trust me when I say that Berk isn't safe anymore. Haggard's coming, we need to evacuate as soon as we can. Not in the morning, I was thinking more close to now. Right this minute, in fact."

"Derek, what?" asked Hope. Derek turned to Toothless, giving him a quick scratch on the top of his head. Hope sighed and placed her hands on her hips. "Derek, forget Toothless for a minute. You can't just show up and say that we need to evacuate the island. How do you even know Haggard's coming?"

"Because I was Haggard's prisoner. That's why I didn't come back. I barely got away. Trust me, he's going to come looking for me and it's much better if no one's here when he does," said Derek. Hope pursed her lips and grabbed the dagger along with its sheath from the work table. She followed Derek out of the forge. "We should go tell Hiccup. He'll know where we should evacuate to."

Hope nodded in agreement and took Derek's hand. With that, she ran



for the house, Derek in tow and the dragons bounding to keep up. She made sure she held tight to Magnus' dagger. If they were leaving Berk, she didn't want to go without it. Hope tore through the front door, up the stairs, and knocked loudly on her parent's bedroom door. Hiccup answered, wearing no shirt, displaying the crest of Berk tattooed over his chest. His eyes were bleary and he let out a yawn.

"Hope, it's the middle of the night," said Hiccup groggily. When he noticed Derek, he perked up, some of the exhaustion leaving his features. "Derek? When did you get back?"

"A few minutes ago. Chief, we need you to order an evacuation," said Derek. Hiccup's brows furrowed, but before he could ask why, Derek continued. "I was only gone so long because Haggard was holding me prisoner. I barely made it away, but Haggard will try to take me back. You know Haggard, Chief. You know that he's not going to give up until Berk is levelled. It would be best to evacuate immediately."

Hiccup nodded after a moment. He went back into his room to wake Astrid and pull on a shirt. He told Astrid the same things Derek had told him, and she began packing a bag.

"I'm going to go wake up Magnus. You two go out to town and sound the alarm. Knock on every door, gather everyone at the docks," ordered Hiccup, slipping easily into his authoritarian persona. "Gather supplies and livestock and make sure to round up the dragons as well. Tell Gran that we're going to NewDragonIsland, and that she should lead the way."

Hope placed a quick kiss on Hiccup's cheek, and then ran back out of the house. After only about an hour, every man, woman, child, and dragon on the island had converged at the docks. Together, they'd mustered up about three weeks provisions for everyone, and were saddling up their dragons or getting into boats. Hope was surrounded by her family. They'd be the first to set off, to ensure that everyone found their way to NewDragonIsland safely. As soon as Hiccup gave Valka the signal, she took to the skies. The other villagers followed suit, with the boats just behind them. Hope could tell, this was going to be a long night.

## 16. Hail Magnus

"This isn't fair," groaned Magnus to Hellhound. No one else would lend an ear to his griping, they were all too busy unloading the ships. They had landed on New Dragon Island at dawn. Hiccup, Hope, and the rest of his family were organizing the people and issuing out supplies. Magnus watched as Hope smiled and handed out another package. He crosses his arms across his chest and huffed out a breath. It sent his blonde bangs flying in the breeze it created before they settled back down on his forehead. He looked up at Hellhound. The dragon cocked it's head, as if urging Magnus to continue. Magnus smiled wistfully and scratched Hellhound under the chin. "I mean, it's my name day. I think someone should pay attention to that, don't you?"

Hellhound snorted and ambled off towards the crowd, leaving Magnus feeling alone and neglected once again. He sighed and turned to look

out over the horizon. He wondered if he'd ever see his home again. While Magnus stared off over the ocean, his brooding face turned up to maximum 'Don't bother me' levels, Hope's eyes managed to stray in his direction. She realized with a fluttering of butterflies in her stomach that it was officially Magnus' thirteenth name day. Here they were, on an island far from their home, and his name day was the last thing on anyone's mind. As much of a brat as Magnus could be, Hope didn't want him to miss out. After all, this was one of the most important name day's of his life. Hope handed the last bushel of fish to Rosethorn and turned to her father.

"Dad, do you think we could maybe hold off on the preparations? Just for a few hours at most," said Hope. She felt sure that Hiccup was about to launch into a lecture about how important it was to get organized, but Hope held up her hands to silence him before he got a single syllable out. She nudged his shoulder until he too could see Magnus. "He's thirteen today, Dad. You know how much that means. He's a man today, don't you think we should honor that? Besides, he'll be much harder to deal with if you don't."

"You know, I do believe you're right," said Hiccup. He didn't want Magnus thinking that he didn't care. He cared immensely. The celebration that he had had planned for the day his son became a man was going to be legendary. But then Haggard just couldn't stay dead. He had to endanger Hiccup's people, his family. Well, he wasn't going to let Magnus' name day go uncelebrated, whether they were on Berk or on New Dragon Island. "It might help lighten the mood. I'll see if I can't get everyone organized enough to make a meal fit for a chief. I take it you'll want to gather up the band and play him your song."

"Yup. I just have to get a singer and everything will be a-okay," said Hope. She placed a kiss on Hiccup's cheek and dashed off. She called out to him over her shoulder before she was out of earshot. "You're amazing!"

Hiccup smiled at those words. They were ones Astrid had spoken quite often, especially over her shoulder while she was walking or running off. Words she still said to this day. Wasn't hard to guess where Hope had picked it up.

While Hiccup gathered up some cooks to make a lavish dinner, Hope set out to find the village musicians. Once she'd done that, she dug through the bag she'd packed until she found the lyric sheets. She still had no idea who would sing the song. She had maybe half an hour to find someone or all her hard work on finding the right words would be for nothing. She began asking around, but no one seemed interested in singing it. Finally, as the food was being set out on the driftwood table and the decorated with seashells and flowers were being draped all around, she finally thought of the one person who would be thrilled to sing something for Magnus. She was sitting on a rock, humming to herself and running a finger over the tattoo on her right wrist.

"Frigga, I have something very important I need your help with," said Hope, approaching the girl. Frigga smiled and slid off the rock. Hope handed the papers to Frigga. "Can you sing that for me? I haven't been able to find anyone else who will and the celebrations are starting soon. Magnus will love it, I know it."

"Relax, you don't have to bribe me with promises of getting Magnus' attention. I'll do it anyways because you're my friend," said Frigga. Hope let out a breath of air she didn't know she was holding, causing Frigga to laugh. She scanned through the lyrics. "I take it you write this for him. It's really good. He'll be so happy to hear nice things for a change."

Hope ruffled the girl's shaggy crop of hair and hurried off to the shoreline, where Magnus was playing catch with Hellhound. He still looked bummed, so it was clear that he either hadn't noticed the preparations going on or he had and assumed they were for something else. Hope pulled the dagger and sheath from the pouch at her side. Much like a wild dragon, when Magnus was in a bad mood, he could both snap at those who approach or run off in annoyance. Also like a wild dragon, it was best to come bearing gifts. Magnus greeted her approach exactly how she'd imagined he would, with a glare.

"Hey, kiddo," said Hope, meeting his glare with a smile. Magnus nodded in acknowledgement to her presence before throwing the stick in his hand again. Hellhound bounded after it through the gently lapping waves. Hope laughed at the sight, earning a confused look from Magnus. Hope placed her hand on her hips. "What?"

"What do you want, Hope?" asked Magnus, receiving the stick when Hellhound returned with it. "Are you gonna tell me to go get some sleep? Because I'm just going to tell you I'm not tired."

"Magnus, maybe if you stopped sneering at everyone and everything, you mind find something worthwhile," said Hope. She smirked and extended the sheathed dagger. Magnus took it with a skeptical look on his face. He removed the dagger to inspect it, the hostility disappearing from his eyes. He gave Hope a questioning look. "Don't think for a second that I forgot, that any of us forgot. And we do care. Happy name day, you little stinker."

Hope gathered the confused boy up in a hug before he could protest. Little did Hope know, Magnus wouldn't have protested. He was just relieved. He only pretended to be annoyed by his family, though he admired ever member. After a moment, Hope let go and ruffled the boy's hair. She gestured for him to follow her, and he did so no more than curiously. As they approached the center of the group, he saw that despite the impending threat of Haggard's invading forces, his family had pulled through. There was a small bonfire, and just beyond that, a makeshift driftwood table laden with food. The village musicians were lined up, and someone had thrown ropes up into the trees so the children could use them as mayday poles. For the first time all day, Magnus harbored the hope that this could be a good day after all.

Before Hope's song was performed, people ate, made toasts to their future chief, and gave Magnus their gifts. Magnus smiled throughout the entire ordeal, and Hope knew he was finally feeling loved and accepted. She proclaimed her idea a success. Sure, the threat of Haggard's forces was still a very real and concerning thing, but that was only in the back of their minds. At the moment, everyone was too busy merrymaking to be anything but... well, merry! But still, there was no music save Destiny singing limericks. Whenever Hope gave the signal, the band would strike up her song and Frigga would sing. After that song the musicians would simply play whatever they felt like playing.

After Hope had decided enough time had passed, she retrieved her flute from the bag she'd packed of her personal belongings. When she caught Hiccup's attention, she raised her flute to signal that she was ready to begin. Hiccup ordered quiet and the band took their positions. Frigga rose as well, which confused almost everyone. Hope knew from the few times that she had heard Frigga sing that this little girl was going to surprise a lot of people. As the band got into their fingers into ready position and the intro struck up, Hope gave Frigga a reassuring nod. Once she'd returned it, she began to sing.

Now, Frigga had not an angelic voice nor mountains of confidence. She felt every flap of the butterflies in her stomach, but she kept her notes steady. The words came from Hope's thoughts and experiences but Frigga portrayed them as realistically as she could. It told the story of the mighty chief Magnus, brother, son, and friend. It told of his strength and bravery and honor. Of how just and wise he was, how his enemies would fear his wrath. Of how fiercely he'd protect, and how deeply he'd love. Hail the great chief Magnus, sang Frigga. For he will never fail. When the last note crept it's way up Frigga's throat and off the tip of her tongue, fading into silence, everyone in the assembly rose to their feet and applauded. As Frigga smiled modestly and Hope beamed proudly, the rest of the musicians struck up another tune. This one was far livelier, made for dancing.

Hope shouldered her way through the throng of dancing Vikings and found Derek. She took his hand and they began to dance together, two more dancers in a crowd of dancers. Hope noticed that Hiccup and Astrid had done the same, the two of them twirling and laughing in each other's embrace. Valka and Stoick did so as well. She recognized parts of their dance from one they'd taught Hope a long time ago, the one they used to do when they were young. Snublout was trying in vain to get Destiny to dance with him, but she just danced around him, arms outstretched and dancing as gracefully as a sea breeze. Eret, who was a little further into the crowd, spun Ruffnut. She wasn't expecting it, and tripped over his foot. He deftly caught her, a grin on his face and a blush creeping up her cheeks. Fishlegs had opted to dance with his daughter instead of Rosethorn, who was dancing by herself a little further off. Tree trunks laughed heartily as her father, plucked her from the ground and spun her in a circle, knocking off Spitelout's helmet with the tip of her boot. Snotlout and Brunhilda were dancing a tad slower than everyone else. They seemed to have eyes and ears only for each other, ignoring everyone around them. For as pointlessly cruel as Snotlout had been as a teen, he made up for it ten-fold as a man.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Derek with a smile, noticing that Hope was looking all around at the other dancers instead of at him, like she usually did. She didn't quite hear his question, she was distracted by Tuffnut's attempt at dancing. He kept stepping on Estelle's toes, but she bravely danced on. Derek laughed and Hope finally looked up at him, one eyebrow cocked. "I said what are you thinking about?"

"How many love stories there are on this one shore. How many friends and families," replied Hope. Derek smiled. Of course that's what his darling Hope would be thinking about. Hope returned his smile and pressed her lips to his. She was beyond happy that he was home. She feeling his warmth, knowing that he was alive and well and here, gave

her comfort beyond imagination. When she pulled back, she rested her forehead on his. "And, of course, how glad I am that you're home."

"Believe you me, no one's more relieved that I'm back than me," said Derek softly, running his fingers through her chocolate locks. He pulled Hope in closer. "I love you so much, Valkyrie."

"And I love you, Derek," said Hope. The song ended and a new one struck up, a slower one this time. Hope kissed Derek once more before the pair began to dance to the music, slow and sweet. "You know, most of the people here will never know it was you that saved them. They all think it was my dad."

"Let 'em think that," said Derek. "I wasn't looking for credit. I just wanted to keep the ones I love safe."

As the two talked in soft voices, swaying slowly to the music, Hiccup watched the two. Astrid, who was pressed closely to him just to keep herself from looking like a fool for not knowing how to dance, noticed his forlorn gaze had fallen on Hope. She smiled knowingly and placed a hand on his cheek. This caught his attention, and his eyes, wrinkled at the edges from years worth of smiles, met hers. She didn't have to ask what was wrong. After two decades of marriage, she never needed to ask anymore. Her hand that was resting on his weathered cheek asked for her.

"They're growing up too fast, Astrid," said Hiccup. Astrid nodded reassuringly and Hiccup covered her hand which lay on his cheek with his own before lowering it and giving it a squeeze. "They aren't going to need us anymore before long."

"Hey, they'll always need us. I mean, how could either of them ever get anything done without our help?" asked Astrid jokingly. Hiccup laughed and Astrid placed a tender kiss on his forehead. "Look, they're going to grow up. That's inevitable. One day, they'll move out, Magnus will take over as chief, Hope and Derek will likely get married, Magnus will find his love. They'll have children, they're own lives away from us. But you know what? They'll always be our children. No matter what. No matter how far they stray or how old they get, we'll always be a part of their lives, as much as they are of ours. So, stop worrying and dance with me."

With that, Hiccup kissed Astrid's cheek and gave her a twirl. Little did they know that all that Astrid had said would not come to pass. War doesn't care about a mother's plans for her children. War doesn't care about family. War will snatch up anyone, no matter what the cost. And war would soon be coming for the Vikings of Berk.

## 17. A Tale of Two Tribes

The party, as raucous as it had been, slowly began to wind down as the sun set. The littlest began to doze off and the elderly exchanged dancing for sitting. A few musicians played on and a few people continued to dance, but for the most part, the celebrations were over. The only thing that remained of the party was the bonfire and a few logs encircling it. They served as benches for those escaping the nighttime chill with the heat of the flames. Hiccup was one of those people, the flames casting long and eerie shadows across his

weathered face.

He couldn't help but blame himself for the Haggard situation. It had been up to him to protect his people all those years ago, and he had failed. The real question that troubled him was even more perplexing. How had Haggard survived being dropped in Arctic waters miles from any land? The cold alone should have been enough to do him in. Even if it hadn't, there was no way he could've swum back to land. His body would've given out from exhaustion first. Hiccup's brows furrowed, deepening the wrinkles around them. He stared at the kindling of the fire as if the answer would appear there.

Meanwhile, Hope was underneath one of the trees hung with ropes, leaning against the trunk. Destiny was in a similar position beside her, running her hand over a particularly large leaf she'd seen fit to pick up.

"I do suppose it's too late to request I be taken home, isn't it?" asked Destiny, not looking up at Hope. Hope said nothing, merely turning her head to face the horizon. Destiny took this as confirmation. "I was afraid that was the case. The celebration surely took the worry off my mind, but now I fear I may never see my parents or my home again. To remain here for the rest of my life would be a dreadful fate indeed."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way. I wouldn't mind as long as my family and friends were with me. Kind of like right now," said Hope. Her eyes roamed over the clearing, picking out faces. There was Magnus, sitting in the sand with Hellhound curled up around him. There were Valka and Astrid, moving supplies around. There was Stoick, slowly dozing off while leaning against a tree. There was Hiccup, staring into the fire as though he were hypnotized. "But do you think we'll ever get back to Berk though?"

"It is for the gods to decide, not I," said Destiny. She finally released the leaf, letting the wind take it up high and out over the water. "I didn't even have time to tell Mother. She'll be wondering where I am in a few days, and I won't be able to warn her not to come after me."

"I wish there was something I could do, Destiny, I really do," said Hope. She sighed and turned at last to face Destiny again. "Like you said. It's for the gods to decide now."

Destiny shrugged her shoulders and proceeded to climb the tree. Hope gave a faint smile and sauntered off. She went to the closest crate she could find. As she had suspected it was full of bedding. She snatched up the first blanket she saw and draped it over her arm. Stoick had fallen asleep at last, but it was getting too cold for him to be without a blanket. Hope placed the blanket over the aging man and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. She turned around to get more bedding from the crate and she almost jumped out of her skin to see Astrid behind her. Astrid laughed, a welcome sound in all the swirling thoughts of loss and grief, at her reaction.

"I didn't mean to scare you, but the look on your face just then was priceless," said Astrid through peals of laughter. Hope adopted an expression that was far from amused. Astrid's laughter faded and she wrapped an arm around Hope's shoulders. "I was just going to tell you that you should think about going to bed soon. We've had a long and

exciting day, but it's getting pretty late."

"Yeah, sounds good," said Hope. She hugged Astrid and looked back at the bonfire. Hiccup still sat there, mesmerized by the flames. "I'm just going to go say good-night to Dad, then I'll head off to bed."

"Good idea," said Astrid, joining Hope as she moved towards Hiccup. "He's been staring at that fire for almost half an hour. You'd think his eyes would've baked by now."

Magnus, still seated in the ring of warm Hellhound provided, scratched him behind the horns as he watched Astrid and Hope sit next to Hiccup. He wondered if maybe a family meeting of sorts was taking place. On the off chance that it was, he rose to his feet and collected Valka and woke up Stoick to go to the fireside. Derek came along, curious as to why everyone was going to the fire. Destiny followed him. Frigga followed her. Ruffnut and Eret followed her. Tree trunks roused her parents and followed them. Pretty soon the entire camp was seated around the fire, each one thinking that there was a reason for it. Hiccup, however, was simply confused.

"Uh, Astrid?" Hiccup asked her quietly. "Why did everyone suddenly gather at the fire?"

"I don't know," Astrid replied just as quietly. She scanned the faces again and again. "You should probably say something."

"Like what?" Hiccup asked again. Astrid shrugged. Hiccup, still extremely confused, knew he did have to say something. Anything. A rousing speech? Instructions? A hopeful speech? A tale? The more he thought, the more he felt he should tell about the events that led up to Haggard's attacks. He took a steadying breath and stood. A hush fell over the assembly. "How many of you heard about the Glacier Bay War?"

Hands were raised, but not all. Hope and Derek's were raised, though both had heard different versions of the story. Hope's had been a bedtime story of how her father had saved the tribe. Derek's had been a drunken tale, cursing the name Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third.

"Wow, not everybody's heard it. Alright, I think it's about time I fixed that. Most of you fought by my side in that dark time. My children were told this tale as a bedtime story for years," said Hiccup. All eyes were on him. Even the dragons came toward the fire to listen. It all started fourteen years ago, with an ordinary gathering of the clan leaders to draw up treaties. One of these clan leaders was Haggard. He had just become chief after the sudden death of his father. I had never met him before that day. He was quiet. He spoke not one single word until it was his turn to sign the treaties."

Derek knew all too well Haggard's thoughts about the treaties. Ridiculous, he called them. Over and over. Haggard would rave and rant about how he disliked the idea having to share his resources or come to another tribe's aid should anyone on the outside choose to attack them. He lived by the 'Every man for himself' mantra, and thought every single one of the tribe's should too.

"He read the treaty and laughed. He thought we were kidding. We couldn't seriously be asking him to invest time, money, and resources on people who needed it. I was particularly surprised, because I'd been very good friends with his father Lars. Lars had been one of the greatest chiefs I'd ever known, present company excluded," said Hiccup, casting a glance and a smile at Stoick. Stoick gave a hearty laugh and continued. "We tried to talk him into signing, promising that the agreement went both ways. He scoffed at the idea. He told us, in no kind terms, that he didn't need our help and we wouldn't be getting his I gave him a final warning. Failing to sign the treaty would make him an enemy to all of the other tribes. I couldn't stop my people from doing what they would to his, and neither could any of the others. He took that as us questioning his authority. And if there's one thing Haggard the Cruel hates, it's having his authority questioned."

Derek nodded in agreement. He of all people knew the backlash of doing so on a personal level. Weeks without food, pretending he didn't exist half of the time, and beating him senseless the other half. Hope saw Derek's face and took his hand. She thought it was because he'd been Haggard's prisoner. She of course didn't know that Derek had been living with Haggard's cruelty far longer than that.

"Haggard declared we had three days, and then he'd be bringing the full force of his tribe to our shores. War was upon us. We had no choice but to counterattack. We lured his forces away from the other islands and towards the Northern Bay," said Hiccup. Hope remembered that. She'd watched the ships passing the island and thought they were like a fancy parade. "There at the bay, we fought the Outlanders. With the combined efforts of the warriors and the dragons, we managed to subdue Haggard's forces. I tried to speak with him, make one last effort to secure peace. He wouldn't let me speak. I told him I'd let him go free if he called off the war. He told me if I let him go and he ended the war, he'd go after Astrid and Hope every day for the rest of his life."

Hiccup felt the weight his choice all over again. He hadn't wanted to kill anyone, and still didn't. Especially if there was any other way. But that day, all he loved was on the line. It was Haggard, or his wife and daughter.

"I didn't want his blood on my conscience, but as a father, I had to do everything and anything to protect my family. That's how he left me with no choice. Toothless held him as we flew out over the bay. I didn't want to kill him, but it was the only way. We dropped him in the bay as far from any land as we dared go. That was supposed to be the end of it," said Hiccup. He sat down, his tone and expression becoming more sombre. "How was I to know that he'd survive? How was I to know that he'd cause all this?"

"Okay, I think story time is over now," said Astrid, quickly rising to her feet. Hiccup's face morphed from forlorn and haunted to its usual cheeriness. "We should all be going to bed. We've had a long day, and we wouldn't want to spoil the day's celebrations, now would we Hiccup?"

"No, of course not," said Hiccup. Hope gave him a quick peck on the cheek and led Magnus off to the crate of bedding. "Good night, kids."



"Night, Dad," said Hope, silently worrying that her father was blaming himself unjustly for all of this. "See you in the morning."

Astrid watched as the people all formed their own smaller fires and beds. When they were alone by the bonfire, she turned to face him.

"This isn't your fault, do I make myself clear?" asked Astrid. Hiccup gave her a guilty look and Astrid placed a hand on either of his cheeks. She shook her head and kissed him as tenderly as she could. When she pulled back, she pulled his head down so she could lean her forehead on his. "No, this isn't your fault. You didn't know he was going to live. He shouldn't have. And it isn't your fault."

"Sure, Astrid," said Hiccup. Astrid furrowed her brows, punched his shoulder and pulled him forcefully into a hug. Hiccup didn't even bat an eyelash. "Then why do I feel this way?"

"Because, you like to beat yourself up about everything," said Astrid. She let go of him and took his hand instead. She pulled him down next to her on the make-shift blanket bed that she'd made earlier and kissed his cheek before pulling him down onto his side with her. He gave her a wistful smile before kissing the tip of her nose. Astrid smirked. "Get some sleep, you crazy old man."

But Hiccup didn't get to sleep. Instead, he waited until Astrid dozed off and then woke up Toothless. He had been sleeping next to Magnus and Hope, where he had likely been keeping watch.

"C'mon, Bud," said Hiccup, strapping the saddle onto Toothless' back. He gave Hiccup a somewhat confused look. Hiccup stroked Toothless' nose in response. "Don't worry, Bud. We'll be back before any of them get up. There's just one small thing I need to take care of first."

End  
file.